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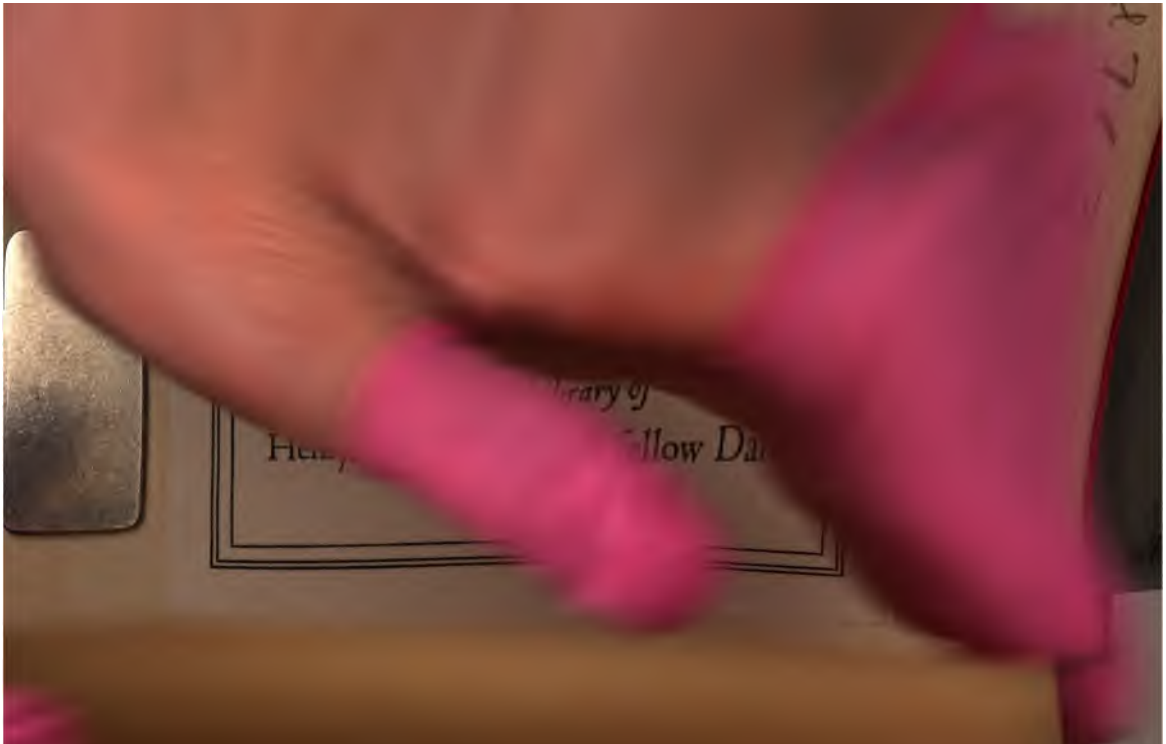

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MOLIÈRE.

From the painting by Pierre Mignard at Chantilly.

Bell's Miniature Series of Great Writers

MOLIÈRE

BY

SIR FRANK T. MARZIALS, C.B.

LONDON
GEORGE BELL & SONS
1906

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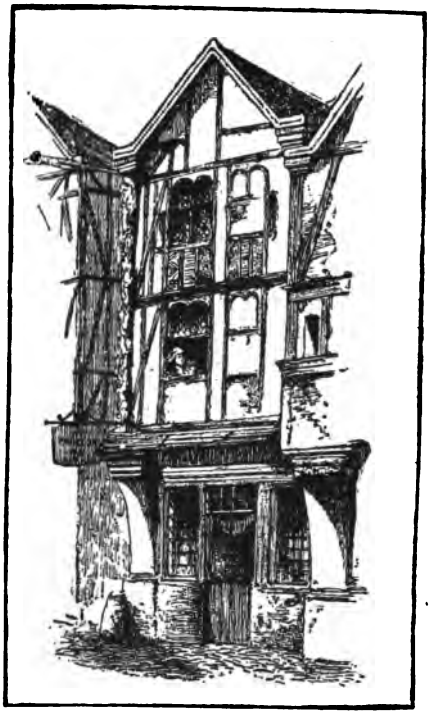

MOLIÈRE'S PROBABLE BIRTHPLACE.
(By courtesy of Messrs. Duckworth.)

MOLIÈRE

HIS LIFE

YOUNGER DAYS AND DAYS OF DISASTER (1622-1646)

TWO hundred and eighty-four years constitute a long period of time, and it is not easy, even for those among us who live most habitually in the past, to picture to ourselves what the world was like in the year 1622.

In that year James I ruled over this England of ours, and had reached an acute stage in that conflict with the Commons which was to cost his son both crown and head. In Spain Philip IV, grandson to the sinister Philip II, and still but a boy, had just ascended the throne, and his favourite, Olivarez, was dreaming—it was no ignoble ambition—of such a policy as would reinstate the country in that pride of place from which she had been falling since the Lord "blew with His winds" and "scattered" the Armada. Germany was in the first throes of the Thirty Years' War, the Catholics, for the nonce, being in the ascendant. Holland still stained with the blood of Barneveld, judicially

murdered three years before, was at war once again, for the twelve years' truce, wrung in 1609 from the tyranny of Spain, had just expired. And France—France with which my story is mainly concerned—was a prey to civil war, and in somewhat evil case. Louis XIII reigned there, and reigned weakly and ineffectually, a contrast indeed to his father Henry IV. For whereas Henry had been one of the leading spirits of his time, a born statesman and ruler of men, and full, moreover, of an almost exuberant vitality, his son Louis was dull of wit and speech, halt of purpose, always under some alien influence, and not yet, in this year 1622 of which I am writing, under the final, and, on the whole beneficent, influence of Richelieu. Meanwhile, being not destitute of courage — that quality at least he inherited from his great sire—he was battling in the South against the Huguenots, who had gathered head under Rohan, and was reducing their cities, and, though not yet quite finally, breaking their power.

Such, lightly sketched, was the political outlook in the year 1622. And of the intellectual outlook what shall one say? Shakespeare was dead. He and Cervantes had passed into the silent land together, six years before, on the 23rd April, 1616, and the world might look in vain for a new "Hamlet" or "Don Quixote." But if these mighty ones had departed, others were left not all unfit to carry on the sacred torch. Bacon still lived—in disgrace alas! for in the previous year, 1621, he had been compelled

with shame to acknowledge his malpractices as Lord Chancellor—but lived with powers undimmed and the "De Augmentis" yet to publish. The "Starry Galileo," too, was still busy with the unravelling of Nature's secrets. Descartes, a young man of twenty-six, was wandering over Europe in quest of knowledge, and seeking for the formula—"I think, therefore I am"—on which to rear the structure of his philosophy. In Corneille, then aged sixteen, France possessed a boy of genius destined thereafter to hold a foremost place among the world's dramatists. Younger still there was a lad of fourteen at St. Paul's School, destined, to use his own words, "to leave something so written to after times as they would not willingly let die." The lad bore the name of John Milton. Of artists, ranging in age from fourteen to forty-five, there were certain giants as Rubens, Poussin, Velazquez, Van Dyck, Claude Lorraine, and Rembrandt.

Into this company, as one may say, Jean Baptiste Poquelin, much better known by his theatrical name of Molière—which he adopted no one quite knows why—was born in the year 1622.

On what exact day in that year? Here again we are in the region of uncertainty. It is quite clear from the parochial records that the christening took place on the 15th of January, and it seems on the whole probable that the 15th was also the day of birth. But this is no more than a probability, and if the precise date be matter of conjecture, so also is the precise place. We

know that the child came into the world in Paris, in a house in the Rue Saint-Honoré, but the house has long disappeared, and the specialists are not fully agreed as to its exact situation.

The house itself, wherever it may have stood, was, without question, a shop. Jean Poquelin, the father, was an upholsterer, the son of an upholsterer; Marie Cressé, the mother, was the daughter of an upholsterer. They belonged essentially to the Parisian *bourgeoisie*, or, as we should say, to the middle class. Of the father a good deal is known, or to be conjectured with more or less of plausibility, from authentic documents, agreements, leases, inventories, and we shall come across him again in the course of this narrative. Of the mother little is known. She was but a young wife when Molière, her first-born, first saw light, and she died when he was a lad of eleven, in May, 1632, having borne in all six children, of whom two were then already dead. Did she exercise any influence over the mental or moral development of her son? We are quite in the dark. Direct evidence is wanting, and there are no data from which to draw inferences, for the *mother* is almost absent from his works. All we know is—the inventory of Jean Poquelin's goods drawn up at her death gives us the information—that she kept her house well and tastefully—had large stores of the napery on which the good housewife of old days so prided herself—possessed a little collection of books including a Bible and a Plutarch, probably in Amyot's most beautiful

translation; also a bundle of birch rods for the better correction of the children; and—this is another touch of nature—a "little chest covered with needlework" in which she kept their christening robes. And so she passed away all unwitting that she had given birth to one of the world's greatest geniuses;—and a year afterwards her husband married again, once more taking to wife the daughter of a tradesman, and again becoming a widower in November, 1636, when Molière was still but a boy of fifteen. Of the influence, whatever it may have been, of mother or step-mother, the lad was deprived very early.

Meanwhile the father, Jean Poquelin, was showing himself to be a keen man of business, selling his wares to influential customers, not disdaining to lend money at interest, purchasing the relatively important office of "upholsterer in ordinary to the King's household," which brought him into periodical relations with the Court, and more than trebling his capital. And the boy would be receiving the education of a tradesman's son. He would go to the parish school, and learn, according to the curriculum then in vogue, his catechism, reading in French and Latin, arithmetic, plain-song, the "manners" that maketh man according to William of Wykeham—and, as optional subjects I suppose, "composition in Latin and French." That the father intended his eldest son to follow in his own prosperous footsteps and be an upholsterer, may be taken for granted—indeed he obtained for the boy, in 1637, the right of succession to the appointment

in the King's household—and there may have been some kind of apprenticeship in the shop. At what stage and under what circumstances did the son first decide to follow another career? Here again we pass into mist and uncertainty. According to Grimarest, Molière's early biographer, the lad's grandfather, a passionate stage lover, was in the habit of taking him to the play and belauding the actor's art, and the lad, conceiving an utter distaste for upholstery, moped and brooded, and finally begged to be allowed to continue his literary studies. The grandfather, who happened to be present—the scene took place on their return from some theatrical performance—adduced "good reasons" to the same effect, and "the father yielded and decided to send his son to the College of the Jesuits." But Grimarest is not an altogether reliable authority; and notwithstanding the circumstantiality of his account, later biographers are rather of opinion that Poquelin the elder sent the boy to the large and fashionable *Collège* of Clermont, for the simple reason that he himself was a prosperous man, and wanted to give to his clever son a good education.

However that may be, Jean the younger entered the school in 1636,—as a boarder, if we are to believe Voltaire, a later pupil,—and remained there till 1640 or 1641. The *Collège*, which not long afterwards changed its name to that of *Collège Louis-le-Grand*, was, as has been said, a large one. It contained some two thousand boys, and boys of the highest rank, in-

cluding even a prince of the blood, the Prince de Conti, whom we shall meet again in the course of Molière's history. And the teaching was good, especially as regards Latin and French. Nor did Molière, as may be supposed, show himself an inapt scholar. According to the Preface to the posthumous first complete edition of his works, issued in 1682,

> The success of his studies was such as might have been expected from a genius so highly gifted. A very good classical scholar he became an even greater philosopher. The inclination that he had toward poetry led him to study the poets with particular care. He knew them perfectly, and especially Terence.

In philosophy his master was Gassendi; but that must have been either apart from his school studies, or after their conclusion, inasmuch as Gassendi's teaching would scarcely commend itself altogether to the good Jesuit fathers. For Gassendi, who has his niche in the history of philosophy as the admirer of Bacon and Hobbes, the ardent opponent of the "nascent idealism of Descartes"—I am quoting from Cousin's Lectures—Gassendi, though himself in holy orders, sat mentally at the feet of Epicurus, was the almost avowed disciple of a master whose teaching represented "sensualism, materialism, Atheism." Not, of course, that Gassendi, a French priest of the seventeenth century, would, in terms, acknowledge the acceptance of any teaching subversive of the Christian faith. The scepticism of the time and country—Saint-Evremond is one of its most

brilliant exponents—was mainly tolerant and full of outward respect for religion, and not even without a genuine regard for its social influence. The bitter hatred of Christianity engendered in the next century had yet to be born. Molière is not at all likely to have heard from the mild lips of Gassendi a "let us crush the accursed thing"—*écrasons l'Infâme!* But neither, on the other hand, I fear, would he hear of any higher sanction for duty than the sanction of pleasure—pleasure, it may be, in its higher as well as lower forms, but still pleasure;—nor would he be encouraged at all to look beyond the horizon of this our little earthly life. And his fellow students, the three men who with himself sat listening to Gassendi's lore, they imbibed that amiable master's Epicureanism with a great gusto. There was Chapelle, who remained Molière's lifelong friend, the illegitimate scion of a wealthy house, himself brilliant, witty, the best of boon companions, a hard drinker, a poet when the mood took him, and ever ready in his cups to expound Gassendi's doctrines. There was Bernier, traveller and author, who, if we are to believe Saint-Evremond, held that "abstinence from pleasure is in itself a great sin," and according to Voltaire died "as a real philosopher should." And finally there was Cyrano de Bergerac, soldier, swashbuckler, inveterate duellist, poet also, author, half-crazy man of half-genius—a picturesque figure recently popularized for us, with something of stage distortion no doubt, in the play of M. Rostand.

So Molière listened to Gassendi, mingled with

these choice spirits, translated the greater part of Lucretius's great poem "De Natura Rerum," exercised for a while his father's office as upholsterer to the Court—accompanying, so it has been alleged, Louis XIII to Narbonne in 1642 for that purpose—and studied law. But law, that austere mistress, did not enchain him long. A gayer, brighter—I was going to say more frivolous, but after all is a play of Molière a more frivolous thing than some forgotten lawsuit of two hundred and fifty years ago?—a more splendid mistress, I say, drew him aside. Was she, that other mistress, the dramatic Muse, assisted in her allurements by the charms of a woman in flesh and blood? *Cherchez la femme*, says the saw; and the older commentators, making search accordingly, affirm that it was for the love of Madeleine Béjart that the budding advocate, Court-upholsterer, citizen, abandoned the more level and commonplace paths of life, and adopted a Bohemian career. Of direct evidence to this effect there is, however, none; and later biographers, and I think rightly, have come to the conclusion that Molière's own natural bent and genius afford a sufficient explanation. Be that as it may, on the 6th January, 1643, the young man threw up his right of succession to the office of King's upholsterer, and received from his father a sum of 630 *livres* to "be employed for the purpose in question," which purpose was probably the promotion, as we should say, of the theatrical company formally established by deed on the 30th of the following June.

It is, of course, very improbable that the father, a tradesman with a keen eye to the main chance, approved of his son's projects; and indeed for some years their outcome was disaster. But I am afraid we must reject, as apocryphal, the story that the father commissioned a certain pedagogue to turn the son from his wayward courses, that the son, instead of being converted, perverted the pedagogue, who—on the plea that the son had been brought back to the ways of respectability, but that there were a few outstanding debts to be liquidated—extracted from the father a sum indispensable for the opening of the theatre, and having performed this *coup* with effect, himself joined the troupe in process of formation. The story is a good one, but smacks of the stage. It is almost too *ben trovato*.

And there are other stories, statements, and allegations relating to Molière's first connection with the stage that must equally be regarded as belonging to the world of myth. According to one version, he began—so stricken was he with stage madness—by hiring himself out as a buffoon to vendors of quack medicines in the booths on the Pont-Neuf, poisoning himself with their wares; and when he *did* succeed in getting together a company of actors, those actors were "ragamuffins, trebly disreputable ragamuffins, beggars, vagabonds, starvelings, half-naked." So speaks Chalussay in his venomous "Elomire Hypocondre." According to the more sympathetic chron-clers, the great actor, manager, and dramatist rst played with the stage before taking to it as

a profession, and we are invited to look upon him as a well-to-do youth, with other well-to-do youths, passing from private theatricals to theatricals of a more serious character. Which is the truer picture? or is either true? We shall never know, never, I fear, be able to reconstitute, with certainty, the life and surroundings of Molière at this particular time. For background of solid fact we have a deed, dated the 30th June, 1643, signed among others by Jean Baptiste Poquelin, and declaring *inter alia* that a company was to be formed under the designation of *L'illustre Théâtre*—a proud title, half ironical,—that, subject to certain restrictions, "Clerin, Poquelin, and Joseph Béjart" were alternately to choose the part of hero in any piece to be presented, and that Madeleine Béjart was to choose any woman's part she liked best. Taken altogether the agreement suggests—here again we enter into the region of conjecture—some experience of theatrical matters, and no great amount of capital, perhaps, but not quite rags and starvation. That Molière's co-signatories were a scratch crew seems clear. There appears to be no reason to regard them as a party of scarecrows.

Of the thirteen signatories to the deed three were Béjarts, and the predominance becomes even more marked when it is noted that Marie Hervé, in whose house the deed was signed, was also a Béjart, the widow of Joseph Béjart, lately deceased, and the mother of Madeleine, Geneviève, and Joseph Béjart. Who were these Béjarts, destined to remain, through the whole

remainder of his life, so intimately associated with Molière, and with whom he became afterwards allied by a marriage that turned out unhappily? Joseph, the father, had held some legal messenger or usher's post, is supposed to have occasionally appeared upon the boards, and was a man of no great consideration. Marie, the mother, had borne him at least eleven children, possibly fifteen, of whom the youngest, Armande—at this date of 1643, no more than a baby—was to be Molière's future wife. Of the eleven or fifteen children, five went on the stage. Madeleine, who figures prominently in the deed as having the first right of choice when any new play was to be cast, stands out as an altogether notable and striking figure. She had, in 1643, seen twenty-five summers, was tall, handsome, with a somewhat virile kind of beauty, and an abundance of golden hair. That she was already a professional actress is probable. That she either already was, or became, an actress of striking excellence is most certain. To her were entrusted, for her were no doubt mainly written, those parts which the great dramatist always creates so lovingly, the parts of the *soubrette*, or family servant, who sees so clearly into all family affairs and illuminates them with her trenchant, alert, brilliant common sense. Nor according to contemporary report was she less accomplished in tragedy. And if she was admirable in her art, she was no less capable in administration. The "Illustrious Theatre," as we shall see, failed in Paris, made its way, under other names, in the

Provinces, and came back to succeed brilliantly in Paris. Throughout its career Madeleine took the most prominent part in the conduct of its affairs. To her cool, clear, business head it owed much. Nor were her own interests neglected. She died a rich woman; died, it may be said, after disposing of her worldly goods with characteristic foresight and precision, and giving due care to her spiritual concerns.

A *maîtresse femme*, not untinctured with letters and versatile of gifts, was she also virtuous? In 1638, when she was twenty, that is five years before the foundation of the "Illustrious Theatre," she had given birth to an illegitimate daughter, of whom the acknowledged father was "Esprit-Raymond, knight, lord of Modène and other places." This Esprit de Modène, who, though married, made no scruple in publicly acknowledging his paternity, was a singular personage, a striking and characteristic figure of the time—noble, rich, dissolute, in love with adventure for its own sake, a conspirator against Richelieu, wounded in battle and an exile, condemned to death, taking part in an expedition to Naples, where Masaniello was in revolt—and withal a man of fashion, a writer, and a poet. Throughout his eccentric and adventurous life he remained in good relations with the Béjarts. We find him many years afterwards acting, with Madeleine for fellow sponsor, as godfather to Molière's daughter. When his affairs fell into confusion, as the affairs of such men will, that kindly and competent woman, acting the part of

a friend long long after she had ceased to be a mistress, did her best to set them straight. Had he, at the time of the foundation of the "Illustrious Theatre," lost his place in her affections, and did Molière reign there in his stead? That Madeleine was Molière's mistress, for a shorter or longer period, was generally held by contemporaries. The quidnuncs, as quidnuncs would, seeing the two in habitual conjunction of affairs or pleasure, naturally came to that conclusion. And so thought Boileau, who was no quidnunc, but a friend and admirer of the poet. Nevertheless, M. Larroumet, after reviewing all the evidence, has grave doubts, and I cannot but say that I share them. To my mind the facts, so far as they are known, tend to show good comradeship, mutual regard, and confidence, rather than love. And though this, of course, can in no sense weigh as proof, one would prefer not to think that Molière married the sister of his mistress.[1]

Anyhow the "Illustrious Theatre," after a preliminary venture at Rouen, opened in Paris, at a tennis court prepared for the purpose, and (prob-

[1] There is an old accusation, contemporary with Molière, and venomously reported to the King by Molière's theatrical rivals, to the effect that Armande was not Madeleine's sister, but her daughter. If Madeleine had not been Molière's mistress this would, of course, matter little. If she *had*, the marriage would be ugly indeed. This is scarcely the place for a full statement of the arguments on either side. Suffice it to say here that the charge seems to me unproven. In order to believe it, we must set aside every contemporary official record.

ably) on the 1st January, 1644. The venture proved unsuccessful. Audiences were shy, refusing to be tempted by tragedy or comedy. Molière and his friends acted to empty benches. By the 1st of July the ominous word "debts" appears in one of the deeds of the association. It soon reappears, and with the mention of specific sums. Money has to be raised. Marie Hervé gives a mortgage on her house; the actors and actresses find security. Such weekly takings as there are have to be thrown into the gulf. Things go from bad to worse. In December the company, making a despairing effort in their vain hunt after success, cancel their lease and migrate to another tennis court in a more favourable part of the town. Vain hope! Their old liabilities drag them down, new liabilities are incurred. Half the troupe, and small blame to them, desert. Molière borrows on his personal property, probably borrows right and left, wherever he can find a lender. The battle is lost; defeat turns to disaster. His creditors crowd in upon him. He is arrested at the suit of the candle-maker, for a miserable sum of 142 *livres*, on account of candles supplied to light the empty theatre; and on the 2nd August, 1645, we find him in the prison of the Châtelet, petitioning to be temporarily released. He *is* released, but re-incarcerated, and seemingly more than once. It all reads like a story in Dickens—the story of Mr. Micawber or Mr. Dorrit—or of Dickens' own father.

THE STROLLING PLAYER AND MANAGER (1646-1658)

How did this sad chapter in Molière's life end? We don't know. Nor do we know the circumstances in which so much as was left of the "Illustrious Theatre," finally abandoning all hope in the Metropolis, merged into some Provincial troupe. This would be towards the end of 1645 or in 1646; and the troupe would be that of Dufresne, known as the troupe of the Duc D'Epernon, Governor of Guyenne; and Molière may have appeared on the boards at Bordeaux and Albi and Toulouse and Nantes, and other places in 1646, 1647, and 1648. Everything is vague during these earlier *wander-jahre* of the great master; nor is there any reason to conclude that he at first occupied any very prominent position in the troupe of Dufresne, even if we accept it as very probable that he did join that troupe on leaving Paris. It is not till Thursday the 23rd April, 1648, that the cloud lifts for a moment, and we see him in the clear light of fact. On that day we find him at Nantes, sent forward by his companions, and "very humbly supplicating" the municipal "bureau" to authorize the troupe—it is that of Dufresne—to set up its theatre in the town.

And so for some twelve years, from 1646, say, to 1658, Molière's life is that of a strolling actor, travelling with his company—south, east, and west—throughout France. A long apprenticeship truly, but not unfruitful. Doubtless we might

possess more masterpieces from his pen if he had begun to write plays, as well as act them, at an earlier date, but I question if the masterpieces he did give us would have been so grandly ripe without the experience of that lengthy pilgrimage. Into a detailed account of its successive stages it is scarcely necessary to enter. France loves Molière as England loves Shakespeare, and pious hands and eyes have ransacked municipal archives, and the records of provincial notaries, for any trace of his passage, fully rewarded for any amount of toil by the establishment of some microscopic fact—his presence at a christening or marriage—nay, less than a fact, the mere probability of the passage of his troupe at any particular place. And fortunately there are some reminiscences, notes, stray letters of contemporaries, which serve to clothe with additional interest the dry bones of fact and probability. Fortunately too, as I think it, there is a romance, the "Roman comique" of Scarron, written at this time, which furnishes a very living picture of the life of the wandering comedian in the middle of the seventeenth century. Thus we can, in fancy, see the troupe of Dufresne, actors and actresses together, faring on horseback or on foot, or in miscellaneous vehicles, over the highways and by-ways of France—highways and by-ways not at all times particularly safe, for civil war rages now and again, and there are lords many and brawlers many. The theatrical properties are conveyed in carts. It is much, I take it, like a very superior gipsy's cavalcade. When a tempor-

ary stopping place is reached excitement reigns. Town life in the Provinces being dull at the best there is a rush to greet the newcomers: what plays have they in their repertoire? are the actors noteworthy, the actresses fair? is the supply of stage costumes ample and resplendent? The local wits furbish up their knowledge of literature and the drama. The local beaux flutter, after their heavy kind, round the stage beauties. Any available hall, tennis court, or gambling saloon is improvised into a theatre, with such scenery as the company have brought with them. For a time all is activity and merriment. Anon the interest wanes, as wane it must, and the receipts begin to abate; and some grandee of the neighbourhood invites the whole troupe to his château, either from a genuine love of the drama, or because he wishes to give special grace to a family festival — marriage or christening — or, seeing actresses are fair, and sometimes frail, for less avowable reasons. But the best luck of all is perhaps an invitation to give a series of performances while the "States" of one of the provinces are in session. These assemblages were of importance. The Governor of the Province attended in state with his local court; the members thronged in with their families; the magistracy were in fullest force. Business, whether judicial or administrative, did not by any means exclude pleasure; and, amid feastings, balls, festivals, what better relaxation could be found than a comedy or tragedy?

So we follow Molière's footsteps, with more

MOLIÈRE RECEIVING A LESSON FROM SCARAMUCCIA.

(By courtesy of Messrs. Duckworth.)

or less of certainty, to Montpellier, and the "States" of Languedoc in 1649; to Pézenas in 1650—where the receipt for the subsidy accorded to the troupe by the same "States" is in the rare autograph of Molière;—to Lyons in 1652-3, where the first of his own notable plays, "L'Etourdi," was first acted, either in 1653 or 1655; to La Grange, near Pézenas, in 1653—La Grange, the princely residence of the Prince de Conti, where Molière had reason to complain of the Prince's venal and stupid mistress;—to the "States" of Montpellier again in 1654-5—where it has been alleged that the Prince de Conti, who greatly enjoyed the charm of his society, wished him to abandon the stage and become his secretary;—to Lyons in the same year 1655, and again to Pézenas, where, if tradition is to be believed, he would sit in an armchair—the chair still exists—in the shop of one Gély, a barber, noting silently the humours of the various customers; to Béziers in 1656 and 1657, where "Le Dépit amoureux," the second of his important plays, was first produced, and where it is amusing to find that the "States" passed a decree forbidding the comedians to flood the "house" with "paper," to the detriment of the legitimate receipts. Thence we follow him back to Lyons, where his old patron Conti, who meanwhile has undergone a religious conversion, casts him off; to Dijon, to Avignon, to Grenoble, and finally to Rouen (spring of 1658), whence Molière and his friends proposed to swoop on Paris, and, retrieving their old ill fortunes, to make a conquest of the capital.

For their fortunes had grown. They were no longer the remnant of the "Illustrious Theatre" that had betaken itself, bankrupt and beaten, to the Provinces in 1645 or 1646, but a company well trained and organized, and prosperous. The picture of their mode of life, presented by the madcap Dassoucy, who accompanied them on a journey down the Rhone, is a picture full of good cheer—victuals and wine in plenty, and of the best—and seasoned, as one may well suppose, with gaiety and wit;—nor when the pockets of that inveterate gambler and losel were empty, did his comedian friends want the power or the will to fill them for him again. *They* had money in their purses. Yes, a picture of jollity, but not, and this is a point I should like to emphasize, of unbridled licence and immorality. Scarron, as I have said, is our best contemporary authority with regard to the condition of the strolling comedian, and, among later masters, Théophile Gautier, in "Capitaine Fracasse," has resumed his impressions on the same subject. Now neither Scarron nor Gautier was a squeamish writer—very far from it—and yet "le Roman comique" and "Capitaine Fracasse," are relatively pure books, and suggest, most distinctly, that the standard of morals among actors and actresses was quite as high as among their contemporaries. Though their mode of life was perforce Bohemian, yet they were no lewder than their fellows. This, I think, should be borne in mind if we want to judge Molière and his surroundings equitably.

And if the troupe were in better case than of old, so had their chief developed during his long years of apprenticeship. Still unknown, or almost unknown, as a dramatist, he was, especially in comedy, an actor of the first rank, while through the vicissitudes, the endless emergencies, the constant calls on his resource, the *unforeseennesses* of his nomadic theatrical administration, he had become a competent, a brilliant manager.

SUCCESS AND FULL FRUITION (1658-1673)

So excellent a strategist as Molière would not be unaware that a victorious campaign required preparation; and he meant to conquer Paris. Through certain unnamed "persons of distinction, who took an interest in his fame," he had obtained introductions to the Court. Monsieur, the King's only brother, was induced to extend to the troupe the "honour of his protection," to accept them as his servants, and to "present Molière himself to the Queen-Mother and to the King." An order to appear before their majesties followed. On the 24th October, 1658, a date which may be regarded as memorable, Molière and his companions gave a performance in the guard room of the Louvre—the same hall to which Henry IV, the King's grandfather, had been borne when stabbed by Ravaillac. The piece selected was Corneille's tragedy of "Nicomède." At its conclusion, Molière, the protagonist of the company, ever ready and felicitous of speech, made a short complimentary address to

the King, asking further to be allowed to "give one of those little entertainments by which he had acquired some reputation, and given pleasure, in the Provinces." So after the tragedy comes a light farce, the "Docteur amoureux"—which has been lost. One can almost see and hear it all: the large hall, the slightly raised stage, the Queen-Mother and young King sitting before the audience; beside them, Monsieur, the King's young brother, a supreme dandy, and beside them again, in almost royal state, Mazarin, the Queen's favourite and all-powerful minister; behind, forming a splendid background—brocade, velvet, plumes, flashing gems, faces, many of note and many of beauty, faces and forms that live for us in the great galleries of Mignard and Van Dyck—behind are the Court. Among the spectators are the comedians of the older company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, following every point with a jealous interest. On the stage actors and actresses pass from scene to scene, uttering Corneille's stately lines. Do they carry the audience with them? The actresses, Madeleine Béjart, du Parc, de Brie, are undoubtedly most fair to look upon. But is this simpler elocution inculcated by the manager from the Provinces to be accepted by ears accustomed to the sonorous declamation of their rivals? See, however, the manager comes forward. Here at least there is no room for doubt. What a striking personality! He is of rather more than middle height, neither too stout nor too thin, shapely of leg, and stately in motion. His face is forceful,

the nose marked, the mouth large, the lips full, the eyebrows black and bushy, the complexion swarthy—the whole countenance most intelligent and mobile. And how well he speaks, with what assurance, and yet what modesty! How excellently turned the compliment to the King! How graceful his reference to the rival company! The Court are captivated and applaud. And when the farce follows he is again the protagonist, the doctor in love of the piece. He fills the stage. There is "go" in all his actions, laughter in his voice and looks, frank fun—we may, I think, take that for granted—in the piece itself. The Court applauds even more vociferously than before. See, the boy-monarch is won. From that hour of free enjoyment he will for long years not cease—it is one of his trump cards with posterity—to extend to Molière favour and protection.

For first fruits of the royal approbation, the large hall called the *Petit Bourbon* which communicated with the Louvre by long galleries, is allocated to the use of the company. And here, within a few days, they open their doors to the great public. The great public does as the Court had done, refuses to accept Corneille, but is at once captivated when the manager produces a piece of his own, "l'Etourdi." As to this we have the unexceptionable evidence of his embittered enemy, Chalussay. "When," such are the words which Chalussay insidiously places in the mouth of Molière,

When, after being a thousand times on the point of hanging myself... I played the "Etourdi" instead

of the pieces of Corneille, marvellous was the result. For no sooner had they seen me with my halberd in my fist, no sooner had they heard my grotesque patter—seen my coat, and my toque, and my beard, and my ruff, than all the spectators were transported with pleasure... From pit to gallery, from gallery to stalls, the voice of a hundred echoes rang my praises a hundred times, and that same voice never ceased, for three whole months, to call for the same entertainment. [1]

The "Etourdi" is not one of its author's great plays. It is a play of intrigue and striking situations, not of character. But whoever has seen it acted by Delaunay and Coquelin will have no wonder that it "brought down the house" some two centuries and a half ago. And as to Molière, I always picture him to myself as an actor of the same stamp as Coquelin—though with a trick of elocution, a kind of catch in the voice, from which M. Coquelin is free.

So *vogue la galère*, as the French say—give the vessel to the winds that are waiting to belly out her sails. In April, in May (1659), the company appears again before the King, and he sees "Le Dépit amoureux," as well as "l'Etourdi." And meanwhile Molière is meditating the production of the first of his plays which shows, mingled with the fun and farce, a serious purpose. His sturdy and masculine good sense has fixed on female affectation of ultra refinement, and what we should now call snobbishness, as a subject for satire; and on the 18th November, 1659, the

[1] Chalussay's "Elomire Hypocondre."

"Précieuses ridicules" bursts like a bombshell amid the social affectations of womankind. But the fluttered literary ladies—the "whole hôtel de Rambouillet" was present at the first performance—are not without defenders. The King and his brother are away. Adverse influences are brought to bear. The performances are suspended, which naturally only whets the public appetite; and at their resumption, on the 2nd December, notwithstanding that the prices are doubled, there is an overflowing audience. The piece has an extraordinary run, as runs go in those days. Victory is assured. Molière has made good his position.

But there were ups and downs. The King was greatly pleased with the "Précieuses" and saw it several times; and on the 28th May, 1660, Molière followed up his success with the "Cocu imaginaire." Then came a temporary check. The hall of the *Petit Bourbon* was demolished in October to make way for certain improvements in the Louvre, and though the King granted to the company another hall in the *Palais Royal*, yet the new premises were not ready till February, 1661, and in the meanwhile actors and actresses were out of work, and subject to the intrigues of the rival companies of the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais, who sought to detach them from their allegiance to Molière. "But," says La Grange in his contemporary "Register"—and I quote his words written for himself alone, because they show what the great man's daily companions thought of him—

"but," says he, "the whole Troupe of Monsieur stood firm; all the actors loved their chief, M. de Molière, who to extraordinary merit and ability joined a straightforwardness and charm of manner, which induced them all to assure him that they would follow his fortunes, and never leave him, whatever proposals might be made to them, and whatever advantages they might hope to reap elsewhere."

Nor with the opening of the new hall were Molière's troubles over. His more serious comedy, "Don Garcie" was ill-received, and had to be withdrawn after seven performances. On the 24th June of the same year, 1661, however, he more than took his revenge with the "Ecole des Maris."

But here I must linger a moment, as the "Ecole des Maris" has more than a literary or dramatic significance, and marks an important point in Molière's biography. For he was contemplating marriage. Hitherto his loves had been those of his time, though indeed such loves alas! are of all times, and of his profession, though indeed his profession enjoys no monopoly of them. But now, in his fortieth year, he proposed, all wild oats having been well sown, to make provision for a better harvest. And the object of his affection was the youngest of the Béjart family, Armande, then a girl of some nineteen years of age.[1] That he was passionately attached to the brilliant child whom he had

[1] In the marriage contract, dated 23rd January, 1662, she is described as aged twenty "or thereabouts."

MOLIÈRE'S WIFE.

From a drawing.

(*By courtesy of Messrs. Harper and Brothers.*)

watched growing up to womanhood, is unquestionable. That she felt kindly towards a man, himself of kindly nature, who had always treated her with the sympathetic indulgence that clever men extend to a bright attractive girl, can scarcely be doubted; and she would have been less than feminine if she had not been flattered by the love of one who occupied such a position in the world, and specially her world, as Molière, and one who could offer her so brilliant a future if she intended, as she doubtless did intend, to become an actress. And what is the significance of the "Ecole des Maris" in all this? why, in the "Ecole des Maris" there are two elderly brothers, who have in their charge, with intention of marriage, two sisters; and the younger of the brothers, Sganarelle, treats *his* ward with a jealous and morose severity, and is accordingly cozened; while the elder, Ariste, allows to the girl committed to *his* care all freedom, and the pleasures suitable to her age, and accordingly is preferred to younger admirers. It is as if Molière had said to Armande Béjart, "I am twice your age, but you shall have the full enjoyment, the full efflorescence of your youth, and loving you as I do, I shall put full trust in your answering love for me."

Alas! the confidence of Ariste did not prove to be fully justified. Molière and Armande—May and September let us say—were united on the 20th of February, 1662, at the Church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois in Paris, and three children were afterwards born to them; but the

marriage turned out unhappily, and during a certain time husband and wife lived apart. Whose the fault? How apportion the blame? or is there blame at all—anything more than "the pity of it"—when certain incompatibilities of character drive two human beings asunder? How far is a woman bound in duty to merge her personality into that of a husband, however eminent? Here was a man no longer young, burdened with the responsibility and labour of managership, an actor in the full exercise of his art, steering his theatrical fortunes through unnumbered rocks and quicksands, his mind in labour of dramatic masterpieces: what he required was a quiet and restful home. She, almost a girl in years, brilliant, witty, endowed with every charm, intoxicated with her position, scenting deliciously the adulation that envelops the successful actress, how should she care to forgo life's glory and pleasures? So they drifted apart. She flirted outrageously, and he, it is to be feared, looked for woman's sympathy elsewhere and gave but too much excuse for her levity. And yet, as I have said, "the pity of it." For he, through it all, loved the brilliant fascinating creature. There is no uncontested portrait of her extant. But he, in words, has drawn her portrait for posterity, done it in terms that are almost a caress.

"Give a help to my indignation," says Cléonte to his servant in the "Bourgeois Gentilhomme" (1670), "and strengthen my resolution to pluck out whatever remnants of love for her may linger in my heart. Tell me, I entreat, all the evil of her that

you can. Make such a picture of her person as may show her to be contemptible. Mark, for my disgust, every defect in her that you can see." "She, Monsieur," answers the valet, "she? a pretty piece of mannerisms, and affectations to excite such love! For me I see nothing in her but what is very ordinary; you will easily find a hundred more worthy of you. To begin with her eyes are small." "That's true, her eyes are small; but they are full of fire, the most brilliant, the most piercing in the world, the most touching that you can see." "Her mouth is large." "Yes, but there is a grace about it not to be seen in other mouths; it is a mouth, look you, that inspires desire—the most attractive, the most loving and amorous in the world." "As for her figure, she is by no means tall." "No, but graceful and well formed." "She affects a certain nonchalance of speech and demeanour." "That's true; but what grace in it all; and her manners are engaging, possess such an indefinable charm, win their way into all hearts." "As to wit (*esprit*) . . ." "Ah! she has wit Covielle, wit of the finest, of the most delicate kind." "Her conversation . . ." Her conversation is charming." "She is always serious." "Would you have mirth for ever in efflorescence, always full-blown? Is there anything more impertinent than a woman who laughs at everything?" "But at least she is capricious, as capricious as any woman in the world." "Yes, she is capricious, I admit it. But in beauty everything is becoming; we suffer everything gladly from beauty." "As matters stand thus, I see that you really wish to love her always." "*I*, I would rather die; I am going to hate her as much as I have loved her." "That's impossible, when you find her so perfect."

It has always been more than conjectured that when Cléonte thus described his mistress, Lucile,

he was really describing Molière's wife; and Molière's wife, who created the part of Lucile, can scarcely, I think, have failed to recognize her own image as reflected in Molière's heart. That *her* heart was greatly touched in return, I scarcely think. The question has been much debated whether her sins against him amounted to more than selfishness and indifference to his affection, or whether, as her enemies [1] insinuated and asserted, she was unfaithful. As to this it seems to me that the heavier charge is unproven.[2] The truth I take to be that Armande Molière, with all her brilliancy, was cold of temperament, and cold of heart, a gem that only glittered superbly —and that as her love never warmed towards her husband, so she was devoid of passion to be bestowed lawlessly elsewhere. In fine her essential portrait, the portrait that goes to the very depths of her, is, as I think, traced with a master's hand in her husband's masterpiece, "Le Misanthrope." She is Célimène, Célimène who is not without a certain attraction towards Alceste, but refuses, in the hey-day of her twenty summers, to abandon for him the whirl of society— she is Célimène, the *grande coquette.* No wonder she acted the part so divinely!

But to resume the story of Molière's life. The

[1] The venomous and most clever anonymous author, or more probably authoress, of "La grande Comédienne," in chief.

[2] As to all this I cannot do better than refer the reader to Larroumet's masterly "La Comédie de Molière, l'auteur et le milieu."

"Ecole des Maris" (June, 1661), was followed, at a short interval (17th August, 1661), by "les Fâcheux," written in all haste at the King's command. Then, again with a short interval (26th December, 1661), came the "Ecole des Femmes," which raised quite a storm. Women and courtiers voted it coarse. Conti, Molière's old patron, now turned to religious asceticism, would probably declare it verbally, as he afterwards declared it in print, scandalous and impure. On the other hand "good intellects" were "numbered." Boileau praised it, as la Fontaine had praised "les Fâcheux"; and Molière himself effected a brilliant charge against his enemies in the "Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes" (1st June, 1663). *They* refused to accept defeat. The rival comedians of the Hôtel de Bourgogne produced a counter attack by Boursault, "Le Portrait du Peintre." Molière, not to be beaten, routed them with the "Impromptu de Versailles" (*circa* 18th October, 1663). But as to all this I shall have further occasion to speak when describing the poet's works. Suffice it here to say that the King sided throughout with Molière, bestowed upon him, while the war was raging, a pension of 1,000 francs, and stood sponsor to his first child (28th February, 1664). And soon there raged an even fiercer battle. Molière's next campaign was directed ostensibly against hypocrisy wearing the cloak of religion, but was felt then, as it has been felt since, to touch religion itself. On the sixth day of a series of sumptuous royal entertainments, given at Versailles (3-13 May, 1664)—entertain-

ments at which Molière's wife obtained a splendid triumph in her husband's masque, "La Princesse d'Elide"—on that sixth day, I say, Molière gave the first three acts of "Tartuffe," or "l'Hypocrite." There ensued an immediate flutter, not only among the unco' good, but also among the really pious. Religious zeal cried havoc and let loose its war dogs. The play was petitioned against, written against. The Archbishop of Paris, Louis' old tutor, remonstrated and afterwards threatened with excommunication any person who should even read so pestilent a production. One perfervid parish priest, the priest, as it happened appropriately, of the parish of St. Bartholomew, denounced the playwright as a "demon clothed in flesh, and dressed as a man," and declared that he was worthy to be burned in flames which would only anticipate the flames of hell. Molière defended himself with his customary address. His memorials to the King are admirable. But the King, sympathetic as he was, and all-powerful, had here to recognize the force of the hostility aroused. Though he increased the poet's pension, and accorded to the troupe the coveted title of "Troupe of the King" (14th August, 1665), yet it was not till the 5th February, 1669, that he finally suffered "Tartuffe" to be played publicly.

Meanwhile Molière had not been idle. On the 15th February, 1665, he produced "Don Juan ou le Festin de Pierre," which was certainly not calculated to smooth the ruffled plumage of the religious world; and in September, 1665,

"l'Amour Médecin," a light musical comedy in which he took occasion to attack the physicians of his time—always the objects of his bitter satire. Then (4th June, 1666), came his great masterpiece, "Le Misanthrope"; and (6th August), "Le Médecin malgré lui"; and in December, for the royal entertainments at Saint-Germain, two light pieces, "Mélicerte,"[1] a comic pastoral, and "Le Sicilien." A period of comparative inactivity followed, during which he was partly ill, partly disgusted with the treatment of "Tartuffe," and it was not till the 13th January, 1668, that the brilliant "Amphitryon" was produced; to be followed in July by "George Dandin," first played before the Court at Versailles in July; and in September by "l'Avare": three masterpieces in one year! The next year, 1669, was much less prolific. It only saw the production of "Monsieur de Pourceaugnac" (20th October), with another attack on the medical profession. To 1670 is to be credited "les Amants magnifiques," an impromptu written at the King's dictation (4th February), and "le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" (14th October); and to 1671, "Psyché," written, again by command of the King, in col-

[1] There is one incident connected with "Mélicerte" which deserves notice. Young Baron, Molière's *protégé*, played the too fascinating part of Myrtil in the play, and so enraged Molière's wife that she boxed his ears. Complaints to the King, and withdrawal of Baron from the troupe. The incident was scarcely calculated to ease the strained relations between wife and manager-husband, and it has to be borne in mind when Baron's evidence as to *her* conduct is in question. She had but too many enemies.

laboration with Corneille (17th January), "Les Fourberies de Scapin" (24th May), and "La Comtesse d'Escarbagnas," written on the occasion of the marriage of the Princess Palatine with Monsieur, the King's brother (2nd December). And now, as it neared final extinction, the flame of his genius leapt to its full height in "Les Femmes savantes" (11th March, 1672). "Le Malade imaginaire," produced one may say as he was dying (10th February, 1673), concludes the catalogue.

A dry catalogue no doubt; and yet showing at a glance within how short a period, 1658 to 1673, Molière wrote those masterpieces of his—masterpieces written, it will be remembered, not by a man who had nothing else to do, but by an active and resourceful manager, the protagonist and orator of his company (up to November, 1664), and an actor ever on the stage. And he had his reward. His genius was not an unmarketable commodity. Doubled by energy it procured him pelf and praise. The King rewarded him handsomely, his theatre was thronged. Success was his. The impecunious debt-bedraggled actor of early days had become a prosperous and rich man.[1] He was in favour with the King, courted by the great. In his country house at Auteuil (1667), where the jinks, it may be, were sometimes high, assembled men of genius like la Fontaine, men of great talent and authority like Boileau (with Racine who was not alto-

[1] His income has been estimated at about £6,000 a year of our money.

gether "well to live with," there had been a quarrel over the production of Racine's "Alexandre," in 1665). His apartments in the Rue Richelieu were ample and sumptuously furnished. And he enjoyed his position—not only loved his art as an actor, but delighted in the pomp and circumstance of the stage—and took a legitimate pleasure in his rich home surroundings. He lived his life to the full and superbly.

THE END
(1673)

Of course in Molière's life the roses did not go without thorns. What roses do? His satire had roused the hate of many, his success stung the envious to a bitter enmity. But this he could afford to despise. His wife—and this was a thorn of a more piercing kind — loved her art, her social successes, her dress—in which she excelled —more than she loved him. Then latterly his health was failing. Though still comparatively a young man—he died at the age of fifty-three—the vicissitudes of his life, its incessant, almost feverish, activity, had begun to tell heavily upon him. There is record of serious illness at the end of 1665, and again in the spring of 1667. He was getting old before his time. And, as misfortune nearly always "hurts the hurt," deaths began to thicken about him. On the 25th February, 1669, he lost his old father. Marie Hervé, the mother of the Béjarts, died on the 9th January, 1670. Madeleine Béjart, his old friend and

lifelong companion, passed away on the 17th February, 1672. His infant son—his only son, for the first was long since dead—closed his brief morning of life on the 15th September, 1672. The King, too, whom he had served so well, illuminating with his genius the gay opening of the reign—the King turned the cold shoulder to the poet, and refused to countenance his last play, "Le Malade imaginaire." This was a blow of which we, in this unmonarchical age, have some difficulty in realizing the full severity; but it was very terrible. Molière owed it to the malevolence of Lully the composer, who had treated him shabbily, as he seems to have treated most people. And then, too, Molière was sick, sick unto death. So at last the roses of his life were all defloured; the thorns alone remained. On the 17th February, 1673, he said to his wife and his beloved pupil Baron, to whom we owe the record,

"As long as pain and pleasure were equally mingled in my life, I thought myself happy; but to-day when I am so afflicted, and cannot reckon on a single moment of ease or satisfaction, I see that I must give up the strife; I cannot struggle further against pains and troubles which do not give me one instant of respite. But," he added after thinking for a space, "how much a man suffers before he dies! Yet I feel that I am near my end."

This was spoken before the fourth performance of "Le Malade imaginaire." His wife and Baron besought him with tears not to act that day—he, O irony of things, was the imaginary sufferer in the play!—and to take some rest. He

refused; there are fifty poor workmen, he said, who will have to go without bread if the performance does not take place. So though racked to death and shattered by a terrible cough, he acted the part of the man who fancies himself an invalid. Among the words he had to utter were these:

God's death, no, by the devil! If I were a physician I would have my revenge on that Molière for his impudence, and when he is ill I should let him die without help. He might do and say what he liked, I should order him not one least little bloodletting, not one least little remedy. I should say to him "die, die like a dog! That will teach you another time to make game of the Faculty."

Such were among the words which the dying man had to say, and through the length of more than two scenes he had to feign death. One can fancy how lugubrious it must all have been to those who knew how ill he was, how real and tragic to himself. At one point he had a kind of convulsive fit, which he did his best to conceal with a forced laugh, so that the spectators doubtless thought the facial contortion a bit of stage "business." It's all like some grim and horrible dance of death.

When the piece was ended, he took his dressing gown and went to Baron's dressing room, and asked him what was thought of the play. M. le Baron replied that his plays always succeeded . . . "but," added he, "you seem to be worse than you were before." "That is true," answered Molière, "I am cold to death." Baron, after touching his hands, which he found to be like ice, put them into his

muff to warm them, and sent for his porters so that he might be at once carried home; nor did he, Baron, leave his chair, so that nothing might happen to him in transit from the Palais-Royal to the Rue Richelieu, where he lived. When he was in his room Baron wished him to take some broth. . . . "No, no," said he, "my wife's broths are to me as *aqua vitæ*; you know all the ingredients she puts into them. Give me rather a piece of Parmesan cheese." La Forest (the cook) brought it him; he eat it with a little piece of bread, and had himself put to bed He had not been there a moment when he sent to ask his wife for a pillow filled with some sleeping drug which she had promised him. "Everything that does not go into the body," said he "I accept freely, but remedies that have to be taken internally frighten me; any little thing would suffice to snuff out my small remnant of life." A moment after he had a terrible fit of coughing, and after spitting he asked for a light. "Here," said he, "is a change." Baron, seeing the blood he had thrown up, cried out in fear. "Don't be frightened," said Molière, "you have seen me throw up a great deal more than this. Nevertheless," added he, "go and tell my wife to come up." He remained in the charge of two religious sisters—of those who come ordinarily to Paris during Lent to collect alms, and to whom he was in the habit of extending his hospitality. They gave him, at this last moment of his life, all the religious help that might have been expected from their charity, and he displayed to them all the sentiments of a good Christian, and all the resignation he owed to the will of the Lord. At last he gave up the ghost in the arms of these two good sisters; the blood that flowed from his mouth in abundance choked him. Thus when his wife and Baron came up to his room they found him dead.

This was on the night of Friday, the 17th of February, 1673, and the time about 10 o'clock.

Then came an unseemly wrangle. The widow naturally wished to bury her dead in consecrated ground in the parish churchyard. But the deceased had been an actor, and actors were under the ban of the church—it is, of course, a mistake to regard Puritanism as a Protestant monopoly—and probably, too, "Tartuffe" was remembered against him. Moreover his soul had departed without those last rites to which the Roman Catholic Church attaches so much importance. True he had urgently asked that those rites might be administered. Wishing to "give evidence of repentance for his sins, and of his desire to die as a good Christian," he had, during the time that he lay dying, sent his valet, his servant, a friend, to the parochial clergy, but been churlishly denied till too late. So the *curé* refused Christian burial: consecrated earth was not for such as Molière! The widow thereupon appealed to the Archbishop. The Archbishop considered. While he was considering she went and threw herself at the feet of the King, for whose amusement the dead dramatist had wrought so often and so admirably. What exactly happened at the interview has been variously reported. As a result, however, there seems little doubt that Louis gave the Archbishop to understand that the case was not one for an ecclesiastical *non possumus*. And so grudgingly, and as it were of necessity, an order was issued conceding the consecrated earth —"a little earth obtained by prayer," as Boil-

eau has it—to France's great genius, but stipulating that the interment should take place without religious pomp, without any religious ceremony, in the presence of two priests only, and not in the daytime. These churlish prescriptions were not strictly observed.

"On Tuesday, the 21st February, 1673," says a contemporary, "at nine o'clock at night, was formed the funeral *cortège* of Jean-Baptiste-Poquelin-Molière, upholsterer and *valet-de-chambre*, and an illustrious actor, without any pomp except of three ecclesiastics; four priests carried the body in a wooden bier covered with the pall of the upholsterers; six blue children bore six tapers in six silver candlesticks; several lackeys bore lighted flambeaux of white wax."

So passed away all that was mortal of an immortal genius. Where his body lies is not known. The one of his children who survived him, a daughter, died without issue. His widow married again—and if she needs excuse therein, that excuse may be found in the fact that she had cares and troubles enough, was vilely personated, and assailed by bitter enemies. The theatre he founded lives still, after two centuries and a half, and holds a place of easy pre-eminence among the theatres of the world. That theatre is, of course, the *Théâtre Français*, which calls itself with pride the House of Molière.

MINIATURE PORTRAIT OF MOLIÈRE
IN ENAMEL.

By Jean Petitot the Younger.

HIS WORKS

FROM EARLY FARCES TO "L'ÉCOLE DES FEMMES," AND SUBSIDIARY PIECES (1663)

MOLIÈRE'S "wander-jahre"—the years of his pilgrimage in the Provinces from the age of twenty-four, or thereabouts, to the age of thirty-six—had not been prolific of literary work; and, if his first biographers are to be believed, it was with great doubt and self-distrust that he began to supply the troupe with pieces written by himself. Of these earlier pieces some have unquestionably perished; those that survive are "l'Etourdi," "le Dépit amoureux," and "les Précieuses ridicules," and, possibly, for the ascription to him is doubtful, the two farces "la Jalousie de Barbouillé" and "le Médecin volant." The last two need not detain us long. "La Jalousie de Barbouillé" contains a sort of first sketch of the scene—it is borrowed from Boccaccio—in which George Dandin's wife, when caught tripping, turns the tables upon her husband by luring him outside his own door and then closing it upon him; and possibly both "la Jalousie" and "le Médecin" may have possessed a certain attraction when acted with go

and spirit by an actor like Molière; otherwise they are in no sense noteworthy. "L'Etourdi" is of far greater importance. The plot—Molière always borrowed unblushingly—is taken from an Italian piece, "l'Inavvertito." Lélie, a young fellow of good family, is in love with Célie, a slave, but of bearing and birth far above her condition, and of great beauty. That the course of true love should run roughly is to be expected: Lélie's father, Pandolphe, has other views with regard to the disposal of his son's hand; Célie's master, Trufaldin, might no doubt be induced to part with her for a sufficiency of ducats, but unfortunately Lélie is far from being an economist, his purse is empty. And then there is in the field a formidable rival, Léandre, who, though engaged to Hippolyte, has been fascinated by Célie's charms, and is handsome, rich, and adroit. Nor is Lélie, the *étourdi*, the feather-brain, the marplot, nor is he at all the man to master circumstances and compel fate to serve his ends. Luckily for himself however, or perhaps more luckily for the piece, he possesses in Mascarille one of those valets—brother, as one may say, to the Scapin of the "Fourberies de Scapin"—who are infinitely fertile of resource, gaily monumentally unscrupulous, born intriguers. So, through scene after scene, Mascarille weaves his webs, sets his snares, lays his plots, and only, time after time, to see the web broken, the snare divulged, the plot unmasked by the incurable fatuity of his master. And finally, indeed, it is not to Mascarille's stratagems but to certain lucky accidents

of birth—Célie turns out to be a "long lost daughter," and sister to Léandre—that Lélie owes his lovely bride.

In this play Molière teaches no particular lesson, analyses no human passion, nor does he use the lash of satire; and the delineation of character may be called conventional. Lélie, perhaps, shows a real personality when he bitterly resents Mascarille's aspersions on Célie, even though those aspersions have been made in order to stop the pursuit of a rival; and so is there reality in Mascarille's pride in his own astuteness, a pride to which his master's fatuity seems only to act as fuel. All this may show observation of life. But, speaking generally, the personages in "l'Etourdi" have only as much individuality as is necessary to support the plot, or plots, of the piece. Molière here was not aiming at more than amusement; if his audience laughed freely he held himself rewarded.

And the same may be said of the greater part of "le Dépit amoureux." Here again the plot was mainly borrowed from an Italian piece, "l'Interesse"; and a preposterous plot it is, a plot so lacking in verisimilitude that Molière himself seems to have had no heart to give it lucidity. Lucile, the heroine, is loved by Eraste and Valère, and loves Eraste. She has an ambiguous brother, or supposed brother, Ascagne, who can't be a brother, because he or she happens to be a girl. Now Ascagne's male costume and position do not prevent her from having a woman's heart, and she loves Valère, and in-

duces him to marry her under the impression—very much takes place in every sense in the dark—that he is secretly marrying Lucile. Naturally the attitude adopted by Valère towards Lucile, whom he thinks to be his wife, excites the jealousy of Eraste; naturally Lucile and Eraste quarrel; naturally Lucile is outraged by Valère's pretensions. Finally it appears that Ascagne is Lucile's sister. How does this come about? Why there is a will, and a male heir wanted, and a girl born instead of such heir, and a boy substituted for the girl, and the death of the boy, and the resubstitution of the girl in guise and garb of a boy, and her acceptance as a boy by the family, including her father, well into the years of womanhood. With the unravelling of these complicated threads all are made happy. Lucile and Eraste are reconciled. Valère accepts Ascagne as his wife. Ascagne's father, who knew that a boy had been substituted for his daughter but never suspected that his daughter was masquerading as the dead boy, is rejoiced by the recovery of his child; the more so that the recovery is accompanied by no pecuniary loss, inasmuch as his new son-in-law, Valère, opportunely turns out to be next heir to the property wrongly obtained. Not very convincing all this, and I imagine Molière was less convinced than any one; but through the absurdities of the story his genius shows itself. It shows itself in a fine study of jealousy on the one side and woman's pride on the other. It shows itself in the alertness of the dialogue and a

certain keen appreciation of the comedy of situation. There is a quite admirable scene between Albert, the father of Lucile and of Ascagne, and Polydore, the father of Valère; and, as a study of poltroonery, Mascarille, Valère's valet, might be own brother to Falstaff, as he is certainly brother to the Sganarelle of "le Cocu imaginaire."

The third piece which Molière brought with him from the Provinces was "les Précieuses ridicules," a satire. It is well known. The schoolroom has it in possession. M. Coquelin plays it at intervals that are never too frequent, throwing into the part of the Marquis de Mascarille—the part Molière himself was wont to assume—the assurance of a long tradition, together with a force and *brio* all his own. How Molière, with his robust good sense, makes merry over the affectations and absurdities of the provincial belles, Madelon and Cathos, ashamed of their names, looking down on their honest father and uncle, disdainful of marriage, and falling an easy prey to the vulgar fascinations of two over-dressed valets. No wonder that when the piece was first produced in Paris, and opposition ran somewhat high, an old playgoer was moved—so tradition has it—to rise in his place and cry, "Courage, courage, Molière, this is true comedy!" If Ménage, scholar and critic, did really, as he claims, tell Chapelain, on coming away from the performance, that a new style of drama had been inaugurated, then Ménage was a critic who anticipated the verdict of posterity.

And the times were ripe. France claims, and

not without plausibility, to be the favoured land of the drama; and certainly neither our own drama of the nineteenth century, nor that of Germany, will bear juxtaposition with the drama of France. But at the end of the sixteenth and commencement of the seventeenth century, France possessed nothing to bring into a moment's comparison with the splendid efflorescence of genius that had its supreme blossom in Shakespeare. It was not till Corneille appeared (1606-1684) that she produced a dramatist of the first rank, and Corneille, though he wrote comedies—"le Menteur" is very good—was chiefly known as a tragedian. Of the other comic writers who preceded Molière, there is scarcely one to mention, except Scarron, and Scarron, though popular, could not be called great. The laughter of the French stage sounded mainly as a weaker echo from Italy and Spain. What Molière inherited from his predecessors did not, in full sum total, amount to much beyond farce. There was ample room for a great comic dramatist. The times called for him loudly.

Then, again, the *début* of Molière's troupe in Paris, synchronizing with the real commencement of his career as a writer, came at an altogether opportune time. We have seen, in our biographical chapter, how from the first he sought and obtained the protection of the Court, and appeared before the King, at the Louvre, on the 24th October, 1658. Louis at that date was a young man of twenty, still under the tutelage of Mazarin, no doubt, but soon to emancipate

himself and rule as an autocrat; and, whether in tutelage or out of it, drinking freely at the enchanted cup of pleasure, enamoured of love, greedy of adulation, fond of display. It was an emphatically young Court over which he presided. They had the gaiety of youth, its briskness, vitality, irrepressible laughter. And the King was young with the youngest. And France was settling down after more than a century of agitation and much bloodshed, to internal peace under the strong hand. Let youth and joviality have their fling! Here was Molière to provide mirth of the freshest, freest kind for the King and his revellers,—to illuminate their pageants, their masques, their dances with the splendour of his wit and genius. Had he come half a century later, what a different Court and country he would have happed upon! *Then* he would have found a monarch battling against age and ill-health and family sorrows, and listening, as it were, to the victorious cannon of Marlborough and Eugene—a monarch morose for all his fortitude, and given over to Puritanism; and the land he would have found wasted by long wars and extravagance, and Huguenot persecution. But *now*, now in these earlier years of the reign, all was going merry as a marriage bell. Here was a King of few scruples, who in return for the amusement freely afforded to him, would encourage and defend his poet, and allow him to send forth the shafts of his satire from under the royal shield. King, Court, and town were ready for Molière.

So they, and Louis especially, hailed his next piece—"Sganarelle, ou le Cocu imaginaire"—which closely (28th May, 1660), followed on "les Précieuses," and is, like "l'Étourdi" and the main part of "le Dépit amoureux," a play of amusement, of fun—indeed of farce. Here again the plot possesses a somewhat complicated character. Célie, who is in love with Lélie, faints on being told by her father, Gorgibus, that she must marry a richer suitor. Fainting, she falls into the arms of Sganarelle, who happens to be passing. Sganarelle's wife, who similarly happens to be looking out of window, sees him supporting the fair form of Célie, and concludes that he is unfaithful. She rushes to the spot only to find a portrait of Lélie, which Célie had dropped. Sganarelle returning, finds his wife contemplating the portrait, and concludes that she is unfaithful to him—a conclusion which he sadly hugs throughout the piece. Meanwhile Lélie turns up, sees the luckless portrait in the hands of Sganarelle, concludes that Sganarelle is the wealthier suitor whom Célie has been forced to accept, and faints in the arms of Sganarelle's wife. Confirmation of Sganarelle's worst fears with regard to the faithfulness of that lady. Fit of jealousy on the part of Célie. Finally the curtain falls on a happy and reconciled group: Célie's father consenting to the union with Lélie, because the wealthier suitor turns out to be married already; and Sganarelle, poor unheroic Sganarelle, relieved of the fear that he may have ...dicate his honour, and convinced, as indeed

is the case, that his wife is the most immaculate of spouses.

Molière's next play, "Don Garcie de Navarre," was, as we have seen, a failure; and it was a failure which must have been doubly galling to him, because he had evidently taken pains with his work in view of the opening of the new theatre at the Palais Royal, and because it was work of a more serious kind than he had yet attempted. Nevertheless one cannot say that the public of February, 1661, was wrong in refusing to entertain the play favourably, for it is somewhat dull, and, according to the poet's own standard, but indifferently written. Don Garcie, prince of Navarre, and Elvire, princess of Léon, occupy towards one another much the same position as Eraste and Lucile in "le Dépit amoureux." Don Garcie, like Eraste, nourishes a suspicious jealousy: Elvire, like Lucile, is proud, conscious of her own rectitude of heart, exasperated by misdoubting. There are differences of rank, but the situations are identical. And it must be owned that in one case at least appearances seem to justify Don Garcie. A fair lady masquerading as a gay courtier may be a compromising companion, and when the jealous lover sees Elvire passionately embracing the disguised Ignès, one can scarcely wonder that he experiences a shock. Then, also, his rival, Don Alphonse, is in every sense formidable. However, all turns out well. The kisses bestowed on Ignès are explained. Don Alphonse turns out to be Don Sylve and Elvire's brother, and returns

to his allegiance to Ignès. Elvire forgives Don Garcie his unworthy suspicions. Ignès, with much philosophy, restores the too fickle Don Sylve, *alias* Don Alphonse, to her favours. And so a play, conducted throughout in the tone and language of tragedy, with much talk of death on the part of Don Garcie, and a near approach to extremities between him and Don Alphonse, concludes tamely. The language, as I have already said, is not excellent. It is obscure, laboured, and often lacks point. Molière was not yet master of his instrument. He had still to show, and notably in "le Misanthrope," that of which he was capable as a poet of serious things.

Of the place which his next play, "l'Ecole des Maris," occupies in the story of his relations with his wife, I have already spoken. It was first performed on the 24th June, 1661, at a time when he was contemplating matrimony, and is, in effect, what the French call *une pièce à thèse*, a didactic play. "Hear, O husbands," Molière seems to preach, "and especially you husbands who are notably older than your wives, do you want to know how to obtain and hold the affections of the woman committed to your care? Then give her every indulgence, allow her the utmost freedom, encourage her to partake, unrestrained, in all the social pleasures natural to her sex, her age; contemplate with no flinchings of jealousy the attentions bestowed upon her by younger men. Then will she love you, and remain invincible in her devotion. But if you

exercise constraint, if you curb her legitimate aspirations for enjoyment, if you try to cloister her from the society of other men, then she will pit her woman's deftness against your clumsy cords of restraint. Her heart will not be yours, and without her heart all your toils are as untwisted tow. What is your strength to her cunning?"

In the play the actual marriage has not yet taken place. We are only on its threshold. Ariste and Sganarelle, two brothers of ripe age, have for wards two sisters, Léonor and Isabelle, whom they (the brothers) are to marry under the provisions of the will of the girls' father. Ariste, the elder of the brothers, treats *his* ward, Léonor, with the most generous consideration and kindness. Sganarelle holds in *his* ward, Isabelle, with a cruel curb. The results naturally exemplify the lesson Molière had in view. Léonor really loves Ariste, and her sentiments are exemplary. Isabelle leads Sganarelle a fine dance, fools him to the top of his bent, pursues an intrigue with Valère under his very nose, and with his unsuspecting connivance—making him the go-between, the purveyor of a decisive interview — and finally escapes from his house by a stratagem, giving him to understand that it is her sister, Léonor, who is the fugitive damsel. It is only at the end, and after ill-naturedly taunting Ariste, that Sganarelle discovers what a pitiful figure he himself cuts. "If you know any husbands who are were-wolves," says Lisette the maid, addressing the audience in conclusion, "then send them

to our school." As to the lesson to be learnt there, one wonders what Molière himself thought of it in after years, when he was no longer the suitor of Armande Béjart, but her husband.

The "Ecole des Maris" brilliantly retrieved the failure of "Don Garcie," and was brilliantly followed by "les Fâcheux." This latter is essentially a festival piece. It was composed,—"conceived, written, learnt and acted in fifteen days," says Molière,—for the sumptuous fêtes given to the king by the ill-starred Fouquet at his palace of Vaux, and represented at those fêtes on the 17th August, 1661. Never had play finer setting. The King, Queen-mother, Monsieur the king's brother, our own Henrietta of England, the short-lived brilliant daughter of Charles I, were there assembled; and the Court in full splendour. When all things seemed ready, Molière appeared on the scene in ordinary dress, and made a mock apology for the unpreparedness of his company. To give the lie to his words, a large shell immediately opened, amid a sparkle of fountains, disclosing a lovely naiad, la Béjart in person, who proceeded to recite Pellisson's somewhat fulsome prologue. Ballets and music were interwoven with the scenes as they followed one another. Of plot there was practically none. Eraste, the leading character, wishes to secure an interview with Orphise, his lady-love. But Eraste is a prey to every sort and condition of bore. He relates woefully how he has been tormented at the play —here the misbehaving aristocratic playgoers of Molière's time come under the lash; and scarcely

is the story ended when the swarm of Court gad-flies come buzzing in upon him. His valet, a "Patter-versus-clatter" sort of a valet, worries over his dressing. Lisandre inflicts upon him a song of his own composition. Alcandre begs him to act as his second in a duel. Alcippe explains in fullest detail all the hazards of a game of cards in which he has been recently engaged. Orante and Climène insist on making him arbiter in some love problem that is exercising their wits. Dorante, a mighty hunter before the Lord, babbles to him of deer, and dogs and horses. Caritidès exhorts him to present to the King a long-winded and ridiculous petition. Ormin presses upon his attention a scheme for the realization of millions—a couple of pistoles disposes of *him*. Filinte persists, *nolens volens*, in acting as his protector against imaginary foes. Finally—for there is a point at which even bores must cease from troubling—finally, by a lucky chance, he rescues Orphise's uncle, Damis, and Damis consents to his marriage with Orphise. Boredom has not been suffered in vain. The play pleased mightily. The King even deigned to suggest to Molière the episode of the hunter —which had not been included in the first draft —and Molière was too good a courtier not to make that episode brilliant above the rest.

Is "l'Ecole des Femmes," first acted on the 26th December, 1662, again a *pièce à thèse*, a didatic comedy like "l'Ecole des Maris"? Scarcely, I think, unless we regard Molière as wishing to teach mankind that it is vain to se-

clude a woman, vain to keep her in a state of utter ignorance, because her natural instincts will find vent one way or the other, and, if she be young, she "will after kind," like the cat in Touchstone's doggerel. This, no doubt, is the moral of the story; but Molière, I fancy, scarcely meant so much to weigh on the moral, which is a little obvious, as on the story, which is admirable. The comedy, taken with "la Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes," and "l'Impromptu de Versailles," that form with it a kind of trilogy, ranks with his best work.

Arnolphe is no longer young, he is forty-two years of age, and has spent his days in ridiculing the matrimonial mishaps of his friends and acquaintances. He contemplates matrimony in turn, and proposes to marry Agnès, supposed to be the daughter of a peasant-woman, and purchased in infancy by Arnolphe, with a view to becoming his wife. Her education for that high office has been one of stupidity. She has been sequestered from the world. She has been taught nothing. How else should she escape the corrupting influences of society and knowledge? So now, at the age of eighteen or so, she is absurdly ignorant, and yet no fool. The character is delightfully drawn. In her perfect innocence she tells Arnolphe, on his return from a journey, that she has made acquaintance—an acquaintance begun in bows from street to balcony—with a charming young fellow, Horace. Horror of Arnolphe, who forbids further intercourse. Horace, however, happens to be the son of an old friend

of Arnolphe, a casual visitor from distant parts, and, all unwitting of Arnolphe's interest in Agnès, tells him of his love for the damsel, and of his various ruses to obtain access to her. Forewarned should be forearmed. But notwithstanding the indiscreet confidences of Horace, Arnolphe sees himself again and again outwitted by the love-taught wiles of his pupil; and finally his discomfiture is consummated when Agnès, who has throughout given him to understand that she has no love for him, turns out to be the daughter, not of the peasant, but of Enrique, a friend of Horace's father Oronte, and destined by both Oronte and Enrique to be the wife of Horace.

This conclusion is doubtless lame; one gets to be a little weary of supposititious births as a *deus ex machinâ* in Molière's theatre. But the scenes between Arnolphe and Agnès, and Arnolphe and Horace, are excellent—Molière himself played the part of Arnolphe—and the characters make admirable comedy throughout. So the play was a success; and with success came opposition and detraction. No man can be a satirist of genius with impunity. Molière had laughed at the marquises of the Court in "les Fâcheux," he had ridiculed the blue stockings in the "Précieuses," he had, in this very play, held up to derision the snobbery of men who add to their names some pompous territorial designation, and had suffered one of the characters to speak evil of womankind; and, above all, the lesser gods of literature and the drama were envious of his well-doing. So enemies sprang up on all sides.

A paper war ensued. Scribblers and poetasters put gall into their ink. The salons, the courtiers, sharpened their hostile epigrams and criticisms. And Molière—well, Molière was not the man to accept such attacks without retaliation. He was a lion ill to rouse. On the 1st of June, 1663, he produced "la Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes," in which he turned the tables on his adversaries. The play is not to be called a play. It is rather a sprightly dissertation in dialogue. We are in a drawing room, and Elise and her cousin Uranie are discussing the jargon of the Court—what la Fontaine called its *patois*. A *précieuse*, Climène, supervenes. She has just been to see "l'Ecole des Femmes," and thinks nothing of the play, alleging—in which I think she is not far wrong, notwithstanding her *preciosity*—that certain parts are coarse. An absurd and unnamed marquis now comes in. He, too, has just been to see the play, and declares it to be the worst ever written; how should a play be good when, owing to the crowd in the house, he has been so crushed, and his ribbons so ruffled? Elise suffers herself to be talked over. Uranie alone remains unconvinced, when Dorante enters. Dorante represents right reason. He justifies the applause of the pit against the contempt of the absurd marquis, defends the play point by point; and, on the appearance of Lysidas—a rival dramatist bursting with suppressed envy—shows that Molière is not justly amenable to the adverse judgements of that criticaster. Naturally Dorante, who may be regarded as speaking with

the tongue of Molière himself, has the best of the argument.

Naturally, too, Molière's enemies remained unpacified. But if, like Oliver Twist, they wanted more, Molière was not the man to deny them. Secure in the King's protection, nay, egged on by the King himself, he produced on the 14th October, 1663, before the Court, the "Impromptu de Versailles," which contains his last word in this controversy.

The piece is very original, and of extreme interest, for it introduces us, as one may say, into the very heart of the *Troupe de Monsieur*. When the scene opens, Molière and his company are on the stage, rehearsing. He is in the thick of his troubles as stage manager: "Ah, what strange animals to drive are actors!" he exclaims. They grumble—they have not had time to learn their parts; and the King is expected in a couple of hours! So he coaches them, criticises their play, their diction, distributes blame and praise. Mlle. Béjart interposes. Mlle. Molière interposes too, pertly. "Hold your tongue, my wife," rejoins Molière, "you are no better than a fool!" "Thanks many, Monsieur my husband," she rejoins; "that's how marriage changes people; you would not have said that to me eighteen months ago." Then Molière takes occasion to mimic the tragic sing-song of the rival actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, who had played or were playing "le Portrait du Peintre," in which he was attacked by Boursault. Afterwards he justifies his constant introduction of marquises on the

stage: "Why, a marquis to-day is the natural stage butt, and takes the place of the buffoon valet in the older comedies," which was a bold thing to say in full Court. It is all in the tone of a real rehearsal. Then follows the piece which the troupe is supposed to be rehearsing. Marquises again come under the lash, Molière, as manager, emphasizing their absurdities by his instructions to the actors. The Court ladies are not spared. All these imaginary people agree to support Boursault's comedy. "For my part," says one, "I answer for 12 marquises, 6 blue stockings, 20 coquettes, and 30 unfortunate husbands, who will give it their applause." So the piece under rehearsal proceeds, bristling with satire. Towards its close Mlle. Béjart again interrupts; she would have Molière defend himself otherwise. He justifies himself eloquently. There is a ring of manly indignation in his protests against attacks that had taken the form of aspersions on his private character. Finally the "Impromptu" closes on a (supposed) message from the King, saying, that, in view of the unpreparedness of the troupe, he has deferred the performance of the new piece.

Throughout this campaign Molière, like other great strategists, had not remained on the defensive; he had carried the war into the enemy's country. Both the "Critique" and the "Impromptu" are masterly pieces of controversy and dramatic satire.

With "le Mariage forcé" we go back to pure farce. The piece was first presented to the Court,

at the Louvre, on the 29th January, 1664; and Louis XIV, who was proud of his dancing and fond of exhibiting it—till reminded of Nero's histrionic proclivities—Louis took part, as an Egyptian or gipsy, in the accompanying ballet. The story is of the simplest. The chief character, another Sganarelle—the same names reappear with great constancy in Molière's plays—is a man of fifty-three; he contemplates marriage with Dorimène, "a young coquette," as she is described in the list of *dramatis personae*. With regard to the wisdom of this step he consults a friend, Géronimo, who cloaks his own most adverse opinion on finding that Sganarelle's mind is made up. Then he tries two philosophers, one an "Aristotelian" and the other a "Pyrrhonist," who deluge him with jargon, and two gipsies who treat him to most unsatisfactory banter. Dorimène's own view of the marriage state is even more disquieting; and the attentions of a young admirer of hers, Lycaste, throw a very baleful shadow on the future. In brief, Sganarelle draws back, but too late. Dorimène's brother, Alcidas, soon cudgels him into acquiescence. Age meets with scant consideration in Molière's theatre—it fared badly in our own theatre of the Restoration—and the curtain falls on a Sganarelle whose future promises to be one of ignominy.

The "Mariage forcé," with its accompanying ballets, was produced, as we have seen, for the Court. A more distinctly Court and festival piece, written expressly for the King, was "la Princesse d'Elide," a "comedy intermingled with

dancing and music." The first representation took place at Versailles, on the 8th May, 1664, in the midst of splendid fêtes lasting over three weeks, and known in history as the *Pleasures of the enchanted Island*. Of these fêtes the real queen, in Louis' heart, was the lovely, the gracious La Vallière. *He* had eyes but for her, and *she*, poor fool, but for him—loving the man, not the King. And Molière entered into the situation. The times were not squeamish where a monarch's amours were concerned; nor was he stricter of morals than his contemporaries. "At the age when one is lovable what is fairer than to love?" sings Aurora, at the opening of the play. "At the age when one is fair what is more beautiful than to love?" comes the refrain. This is the *leit-motiv* throughout. "Hard is it for a young prince to be great and generous unless he is in love," says Arbate to his pupil Euryale, Prince of Ithaca. "To live without loving is not to live at all," says Cynthie to her cousin, the Princesse d'Elide. Euryale, already fascinated by the charms of the princess, swallows these doctrines with avidity; but the princess, surfeited with adulation, is only brought to finally accept the prince's suit by his pretended disdain. Such is the leading thread of the story. There are also would-be love passages between Moron, an astute court-jester, and Philis,—his suit, however, faring less favourably than that of Touchstone in similar circumstances, for Philis, unlike Audrey, prefers her country swain Tircis to Moron. It is all inchoate, unfinished, bearing

marks of haste, half prose, half verse—in reality an impromptu. The true interest, for once, is not on the stage. It is centred on La Vallière (afterwards, in religion, Sœur Louise de la Miséricorde), on the King;—and on Molière's wife, who acted the part of the princess, the observed of all observers in that magnificent assembly, occupying a position, as Molière must by this time have known, of terrible fascination for a young woman of her temperament.

FROM "TARTUFFE" TO "GEORGE DANDIN" (1663-1668)

And now we come in chronological order to two plays of greater weight and significance. We reach in them, as it were—with the "Misanthrope" to follow shortly—the summit of Molière's work. The two plays in question are "le Tartuffe, ou l'Imposteur" and "Don Juan."

"Tartuffe" has a history of its own, and not a short history. But of the flutter which it created from the time when the three first acts were played before the King on the 12th May, 1664, at the royal fêtes of Versailles, I have already spoken when telling the story of Molière's life, and I need not go over the ground again. The plot is well known. Orgon is a wealthy citizen of Paris, a religious man, a man of good intentions, but credulous, weak in judgement, violent, a fool. He has submitted himself unreservedly to the influence of Tartuffe, a needy adventurer, who, under a mask of the greatest

piety, cloaks the most diabolical schemes. Naturally dissension reigns in the family. Madame Pernelle, Orgon's foolish, waspish mother, sides with him in his devotion to the impostor. Elmire, the wife—she is the second wife and stepmother to Mariane and Damis, the daughter and son—these and Cléante, the brother-in-law, and Dorine—Mariane's maid and a most important and brilliant personage—see the scoundrel as he really is. Now Orgon, before he placed his soul in Tartuffe's keeping, had promised to give Mariane to Valère for wife, but Tartuffe has other designs. He courts the rich heiress. So Orgon recalls his given word, and uses all his power as a father to compel Mariane to accept this new and most unacceptable lover. Thus the plot thickens. Unfortunately for himself Tartuffe is vulnerable. In his utter contempt for Orgon he makes love to Orgon's wife, Elmire. Damis, a headstrong youth, in trying to open his father's eyes, so inflames that credulous fool that he not only gives over all his goods to Tartuffe, but entrusts him with a most compromising casket. Thereupon Elmire intervenes: "If you hear Tartuffe, actually hear him with your own ears, make love to me, will you believe that you are his dupe?" she asks Orgon. "The thing is impossible," he replies. Nevertheless he finally consents to listen under the table; and tardily, very tardily, almost *in extremis*, as one may say, he is convinced. But Tartuffe is now master of the situation. He possesses Orgon's property; he can crush him by means of the casket. And

he exercises his malign power to the uttermost. He supervenes while Orgon, despoiled of his house and warned of his danger by Valère, the discarded lover, is preparing to fly, and announces that the prince orders Orgon to prison. But here a sudden transformation takes place. The Prince, it appears, knew all about Tartuffe. It is *he* that goes off to prison. Orgon is reinstated and forgiven. Mariane and Valère are made happy.

This conclusion, this intervention of the omniscient Prince, though it doubtless helped to make the play palatable to Louis, can scarcely be regarded as satisfactory. Molière was here rather the strategical manager than the literary artist. With the antecedent portions of the play it is very different. Up to that last point the construction is admirable. From the first scene, which excited Goethe's admiration—"the greatest and best thing that exists of the kind," he calls it—from the first scene onwards there is growth and development of incident and character. The sinister figure of Tartuffe, with his "lock up my hair shirt and my scourge," does not appear on the stage till the second scene of the third act, but how well it has been prepared for! It comes like a climax in music, like a splash of hoarded light in a picture or etching by Rembrandt. And the characters of the piece are all drawn with a master's hand.

As to Molière's intention in the play: of course he protested that his shafts were aimed at hypocrisy, not religion; *that* was his obvious line of

defence. But can it be said that the shafts never struck the reality behind the sham? No doubt there are certain forms of hypocrisy so gross and stupid that misapprehension is not possible. I don't know that any religious sensibility has been seriously affected in England by the portraits of Stiggins or Chadband. Tartuffe, however, is a very different personality, and though he is a hypocrite, much that he does, much that he says, would approve itself to a devout Roman Catholic of the seventeenth century, even of the twentieth. "Whenever, for one cause or another, the free-thinkers have been able to mass public opinion against the Church, then immediately, both in Paris and in the provinces, Tartuffe reappears": so speaks Veuillot in his "Molière et Bourdaloue," and though Veuillot was a venomous publicist, I don't know that here he spoke untruly. Molière certainly did not look at life from a religious point of view.

Nor, if he had been very wishful to convince his contemporaries of his orthodoxy, would he, I think, have produced "Don Juan, ou le Festin de Pierre," on the 15th February, 1665, while the battle was raging round Tartuffe. For indeed the play, taken in its essence, scarcely makes for edification, and one can imagine the somewhat contemptuous smile on the countenance of the great satirist as he wrote scene after scene, to the fiery conclusion. We all know the story, half grim, half grotesque, a thing born of the sombre and credulous genius of Spain, we know it, for it has been set by Mozart, with a genius

not unequal to that of Molière himself, to the universal language of music. Don Juan is the "super-man," the lord of creation of his time. The world is his oyster. Man, and especially woman, are his prey. He has had numberless illicit loves. For last escapade he has induced Elvire to escape from her convent, and secretly marry him. Now he is tired of Elvire, and has run away from her with his servant, Sganarelle. Elvire follows, and upbraids. He treats her with uncompromising frankness. Pursuing a new amour, he suffers ship-wreck; is rescued; makes love to two peasant girls at once: "how happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away"; beats the peasant swain who had rescued him from the deep; escapes in disguise from the brothers of Elvire; discourses of theology with Sganarelle, who is a fool; gives a gold piece to a pious poor beggar "for the love of humanity"; rescues one of Elvire's brothers from robbers, the brothers postponing their vengeance in consequence; enters the mausoleum of the Commander, whom he had killed some time before, and invites him to supper, whereupon the Commander's Statue bows acquiescence; disposes with grace and efficacy of an importunate creditor; receives a visit of remonstrance from his outraged father; also from Elvire, who comes to forgive him and exhort him to repentance; also from the Statue, who comes to supper in reply to his invitation, and, in turn, invites him to supper for the next day, if his courage is equal to it. "Courage," of course he has courage. Meanwhile he puts on a

cloak of hypocrisy, deceiving his father, who rejoices at his conversion. He explains, at length, to Sganarelle all the advantages a hypocrite enjoys —"Tartuffe" was in the air, it will be remembered —and marches off to meet the Statue. On the way, he has an interview with one of Elvire's brothers, Don Carlos, to whom he promises the "satisfaction of a gentleman." Carlos disposed of, a spectre appears to warn him. He attacks it with his sword, and passes on into the mausoleum undaunted—finally to disappear from this world in the grip of the avenging Statue, with fire in his vitals, and a yawning abyss of flame prepared for his reception.

Does this conclusion seem that of a morality-play, of a sort of "Everyman"? Unfortunately it is not quite the conclusion. Looking down into the fiery pit Sganarelle, for last word, laments over his lost wages. Molière is but too evidently poking grim fun at us.

From what precedes it will be seen that Don Juan's last hours have been pretty well filled. Is the piece thereupon a good piece? Sarcey says not, says it is a very bad one, about as badly constructed as may be; and from the opinion, on such a point, of that most excellent dramatic critic, I scarcely like to differ. But Don Juan, —apart from the hypocrisy introduced, so it seems to me, merely in view of the battle raging over "Tartuffe,"—Don Juan is a fine typic character. To Molière he stood, not so much for the universal lover, as he stood to Mozart and Byron—as for the *libertin* of the Regency—for

the brother or cousin of Esprit de Modène, of Cyrano de Bergerac, or, with less of intellect and conduct in Don Juan, of Saint-Evremond. But the type is perennial. The baleful "super-man" who preys on man and woman alike, and whose one redeeming quality, such as it is, is courage—that creature belongs to all time.

"L'Amour Médecin," first produced at Versailles in September, 1665, was again a Court piece, "written, learnt, and played in four days," if we are to believe the author. Apart from the scenes in which the medical practitioners of the time figure, not at all to their advantage—scenes to which I shall have to revert—the piece may again be called one of pure amusement. Sganarelle, yet another Sganarelle, has a daughter, Lucinde, and Lucinde is in love, and Sganarelle, though otherwise a doating father, will not hear of her marriage. Whereupon Lucinde feigns sickness, and takes to her bed. The physicians are called in, and indulge in the "faw and fum" to which, according to Coleridge's well-known line, the "fee" acts as a prelude. By the management of Lisette, the maid, a more efficient practitioner is introduced, in the shape of Clitandre, the lover, masquerading as a Doctor; and Sganarelle is well tricked into a most involuntary consent to the marriage.

Of the "Misanthrope," which followed "l'Amour Médecin," on the 4th June, 1666, I speak elsewhere. Sufficient here to say that though a masterpiece, and indeed *the* masterpiece, its beauties were of too serious a character

for immediate popular success; and that, on the 6th August, Molière thought well to follow it with another piece of light brilliant gaiety, the "Médecin malgré lui." Here again we are in the regions of irresponsible farce. Sganarelle, a dissipated wood-cutter, quarrels with his wife Martine, and beats her. While she is meditating vengeance, two men come by seeking for a Doctor to cure Géronte's daughter, Lucinde, who has become suddenly dumb. Martine's vengeance lies before her. She describes Sganarelle to the two men, as a physician, eccentric of demeanour, no doubt, but marvellous in his art. Sganarelle, when found, naturally protests he knows nothing of medicine. The two men incontinently bring him to reason with their cudgels; and, in sooth, when it comes to the touch, Molière quite gives us to understand that Sganarelle's skill is not more really feigned than that of the more orthodox practitioners. Now it happens that Lucinde is only pretending to be dumb, so as not to marry a rich suitor—her heart being given to the young and handsome Léandre. Léandre, who is wide-awake, buys the services of Sganarelle, and is introduced by him to Lucinde's apartment in the guise of an assistant apothecary. The lovers incontinently elope. Sganarelle is threatened with the law's utmost penalty for his share in the business. But before the law can take its course, Léandre and Lucinde reappear—Léandre made rich by a lucky inheritance. The father is reconciled. "As you are not to be hung," says Martine to Sganarelle,

"thank me for being made a physician; it is to me that you owe that honour";—"and I don't know how many beatings besides," rejoins Sganarelle.

In "la Princess d'Elide," as we have seen, Molière's wife had taken the prominent, perhaps too prominent, part of the Princess. Was it of design that Molière assigned to her parts of less brilliancy in the performances given before the Court at the Château of Saint-Germain between the 1st December, 1666, and 20th February, 1667? It has been so conjectured; but what is the real worth of conjecture in a world of illimitable possibilities? The three pieces which Molière had prepared by the King's command for these Fêtes, were "Mélicerte," "la Pastorale comique," and "le Sicilien, ou l'Amour Peintre." "Mélicerte" is designated a "pastoral heroic comedy," and remains a fragment, and unfinished. The scene is laid in Thessaly, in the vale of Tempe, and the various *dramatis personae* are described as shepherds, shepherdesses, nymphs. But the pastoral element may be disregarded. For nature Molière cared not one tittle. To him, I take it, brocade, satin, velvet, the flash of diamond or ruby, "Solomon in all his glory," far outshone the lily of the field. Here amid the vales of Thessaly, Lycarsis, the shepherd, declares himself to be dazzled by the sight of a company of "lords, magnificent from head to heel," and expressly says, "our fields in spring, with all their flowers, are far less resplendent." It is a pretty artificial world in which

the swains, Acante and Tyrène, love Eroxène and Daphné, and Daphné and Eroxène focus their affections on the young and beautiful Myrtil, while Myrtil will have nothing to say to them, but centres *his* affection on the "nymph or shepherdess," Mélicerte, who returns his passion. How was it all to end if the play had ever had an ending? Mélicerte was clearly to be a long-lost daughter, and Myrtil, I take it, to be a long-lost son, and their loves, menaced for a moment by storm and cloud, were to pass finally into sunshine. But over all this we need scarcely linger; and still less over the "Pastorale comique," for it is only a trifle. "Le Sicilien, ou l'Amour Peintre" has greater importance. It shows, with grace and spirit, how Adraste, a French gentleman, under pretence of painting her portrait, obtains access to Isidore, an emancipated Greek slave, and with the help of his sister Climène, who personates Isidore, filches the latter from the jealous guardianship of Don Pèdre, a gentleman of Sicily. Was Molière somewhat wasting his great powers over such works as "Mélicerte" or the "Pastorale," or even "le Sicilien"? Anyhow they pleased the Court, and as I have already intimated, to please the Court meant greater freedom to write masterpieces. The King awarded to the troupe a subsidy, amounting to two years of the royal pension, and gave to Mlle. du Parc and to Molière's wife, who had acted in "le Sicilien," two rich mantles.

Between the production of these three pieces (December, 1666, to February, 1667) and the

production of "Amphitryon" on the 13th January, 1668, there is an unusual gap. Molière was out of health and discouraged. But his work remains at its gayest. The piece sparkles. It is borrowed, in outline and much of the detail, from Plautus. It follows in date a play on the same subject by Rotrou. And yet it is, in the highest sense, original. Molière discards here the usual alexandrine verse of French comedy, and adopts what the French call *vers libres*, an irregular metre with lines of unequal length and interlacing rhymes, a metre, like our own blank verse, all the more difficult for its apparent ease, and handled in this play with the assurance, the inevitableness, the felicity of a master. Jupiter is the hero, Jupiter masquerading in the shape of Amphitryon, who is away at the wars, and in that shape obtaining the favour of Amphitryon's wife, Alcmène. The resulting embroglio need scarcely be described in detail—how Amphitryon, returning, is first mystified, then horror-stricken by Alcmène's account of what had taken place during his absence, how he vows vengeance, and how Jupiter, in a highly superior way, vanishes in a cloud. Subsidiarily there is a sort of second plot, in which Mercury takes the shape of Sosie, Amphitryon's valet, and amuses himself with Sosie and Sosie's wife, Cléanthis. It is all light, bright, amusing, fantastic, unreal —so unreal that any question of morals seems an impertinence. And yet the question of morals has been raised very seriously. The production of the play, as it happens, shortly followed the

commencement of the love of Louis for Mme. de Montespan, and some later critics, Michelet the historian among the number, have seen fit to read Louis for Jupiter, and Athenaïs de Montespan for Alcmène, and M. de Montespan for Amphitryon, while Molière himself cuts in the story the sorry figure of a vicious flatterer and parasite. All this, for reasons which need not here be detailed, I hold to be criticism in cloudland.

"George Dandin, ou le mari confondu," was again a comedy, with songs and dances, written for the Court. It was produced at Versailles on (approximately) the 18th July, 1668, at the Fêtes designed to celebrate the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, concluded, to the advantage of France, in the foregoing May. The play, though in parts light and farcical, is not without its serious lesson, and to poor, befooled, brow-beaten George Dandin himself the incidents are sad enough. "Ah! what a strange thing it is to have a lady for wife! and what an eloquent lesson my marriage is to all peasants who would raise themselves above their condition, and ally themselves, as I have done, to the house of a gentleman!" so he opens the play; and his final words are: "When a man has, like me, married a bad wife, the best thing he can do is to go and throw himself into the river, head first." And indeed his wife, who by the irony of fate bears the name of Angélique, and his father-in-law and mother-in-law, M. and Mme. de Sottenville, and Angélique's lover, Clitandre, and her maid Claudine, have led him a pretty dance. Though he

has the most unimpeachable proof of her flirtations and unfaithfulness, they spurn him from the height of their social superiority and compel him—he is but a poor weak-kneed creature—to abject apologies. When he finds his wife roaming at night and locks her out, she shams self-destruction, and so lures him from the house, and then re-entering it herself, leaves him to general derision as a drunkard and a losel. Poor George Dandin, he furnishes a name for all time to the deceived husband who is a fool.

FROM "L'AVARE" TO "LE MALADE IMAGINAIRE" (1668-1673)

With "l'Avare" (9th September, 1668), we pass again to more serious comedy. The piece, like "l'Amphitryon," is borrowed from Plautus, but borrowed with far greater freedom, because, while avarice is of all times and places, this special *avare* is a French and not a Roman miser. Harpagon, for that is his name, has a daughter and a son, Elise and Cléante, whom he treats after his niggardly kind. Elise is loved by Valère, who has saved her from drowning; and as the father will have nothing to say to any suit that does not offer sufficient financial advantages, and is bent on marrying her to Anselme, who is old and rich, Valère enters the miser's service, and bides his time, currying favour with him by endorsing his worst economies. Cléante, the son, is, on the other hand, in love with Mariane, a girl of grace and beauty, but poor. Now it so happens

that Harpagon has cast his senile affection on the same girl, and thus father and son are rivals—with a result of winged words when the rivalry is disclosed. Cléante, kept penniless by his father, has recourse to the usurers, and words that have not only wings, but beak and talons, are again in the air when the son discovers that the man from whom, in his necessity, he is borrowing on monstrous terms, is his own father—while the father, to his horror and indignation, becomes aware that he has a son prepared to accept a bargain so disastrous. All these scenes make excellent comedy. Of course Harpagon is tricked and befooled. A casket containing ten thousand pieces of his gold is stolen by la Flèche, Cléante's valet. While he is cursing, raging, lamenting over his loss, it comes to his knowledge that Valère, whom he is accusing of the theft, has obtained Elise's consent to a formal marriage engagement. "My ducats, O my daughter!" The situation, with differences, is that of Shylock. All the vials of his wrath are emptied on the head of Valère, whom he holds to be doubly guilty, and on the head of Elise. Then comes one of those *dénoûments* which Molière affectioned. Valère turns out to be the long-lost son of Anselme, and Mariane his long-lost daughter. Anselme, who is a good fellow, naturally resigns all claim to the hand of Elise. Cléante restores the casket purloined by his valet, La Flèche. From this point things go well. Harpagon, being relieved by the generosity of Anselme from all pecuniary liabilities, present and to come—

dowries, settlements, wedding costs, law fees, etc., etc.—the miser makes a pretty long list of them—Harpagon being clear of solicitude on these heads, abandons his pretensions to the hand of Mariane, and consents to the happiness of the young people. He finally leaves the stage to have another fond look at his "dear casket."

"Monsieur le Pourceaugnac," is again, like "le Médecin malgré lui" and "le Mariage forcé," a piece of pure comedy, with added satire against the medical profession. It is a court piece intermingled with dancing and music, and was first acted at Chambord on the 6th October, 1669, taking the Court mightily. The hero, Monsieur de Pourceaugnac, is a gentleman of Limoges, a gentleman on the confines of gentility, and with a dash of the lawyer. He has come to Paris to be married to Oronte's daughter, Julie, who, however, is in love with Eraste, a less monied suitor. Eraste and Julie, in their extremity, appeal to Nérine and Sbrigani, a "woman" and "man" "of intrigue," as they are described in the list of *dramatis personae*—and poor M. de Pourceaugnac has a very bad time. He is taken, under guise of friendship, to the house of an apothecary, and handed over to two physicians, with an intimation that he has lost his wits. Oronte's ears are also poisoned against him, so that when, after escaping from medical durance, he presents himself to his future father-in-law, he is received as a madman and a bankrupt. His own ears, too, are poisoned against Julie, who, moreover, disgusts him by her assumed

forwardness. Then Nérine and an accomplice appear in Oronte's house, wearing the garb, and speaking the speech of women from Saint-Quentin in the north and Pézenas in the south, and claim the poor country gentleman as their husband, and the father of their progeny, then and there presented. Threatened with arrest as a bigamist, he disguises himself as a woman, and attempts flight, but is discovered, and only finally escapes from his tormentors by a free use of bribery. His last words, addressed to Sbrigani, the organiser of all his woes, are: "This is the only honest man I have found in this city!" As to Julie and Eraste, they of course succeed in befooling Oronte, for age in that particular world was made to be befooled; and one can only wonder how long they will refrain from turning one against the other their remarkable powers of dissimulation and intrigue. "La grande affaire est le plaisir!" Heigho for pleasure! sing the chorus in conclusion.

Molière's next piece was again written expressly for a Court pageant. It bears the title of "les Amants magnifiques," and was first acted at Saint-Germain on the 4th February, 1670. The King himself propounded the theme. Two princes, magnificent in their rivalry, were to endeavour to outshine each other in a series of superb entertainments, and so win the heart of a royal Princess. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, hearts are not to be thus won. In vain do twenty-four tritons, and four loves seated on dolphins, and the "god Æolus lifted above the waves on a little

cloud," and Neptune himself, appear upon the scene; in vain does the "nymph of Tempe" invite to a rustic play, and Fauns and Dryads dance, and shepherds and shepherdesses sing and make merry; in vain do "eight statues each bearing a torch," intermingle their "varied" and "beautiful attitudes" in a grotto: Eriphile has no eyes for Iphicrate and Timoclès, her magnificent lovers, no more than a careless glance to bestow upon their pageantry. Her heart has been won by the timid passion of Sostrate, a soldier of merit, but humbler birth. Will she marry him? Not till Venus, a sham Venus got up by a rascally astrologer, pronounces in Sostrate's favour. *Then* she consents to the *mésalliance*:—a conclusion with which her "magnificent lovers" are naturally ill-satisfied, holding, not without plausibility, that they have been shabbily treated. Of course the play is a mere setting for the magnificent interludes, in which the King himself had originally intended[1] to figure as Neptune and the Sun-god; but Molière has succeeded in imparting to it dramatic interest by a satire of astrology, and also by a study of the love of the Princess for her less exalted adorer.

On the 14th of October in that same year, 1670, we are again at Chambord, and again, as in "M. de Pourceaugnac," the Court is regaled with a comedy, verging on farce, accompanied by dances and music. But the "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," amusing as it is, is not a piece

[1] If indeed he did not actually take part in the first performance.

of mere fun. It contains, especially in the earlier parts, excellent satire besides the excellent fooling, and the scenes of love quarrel and love despite are most graceful and effective. M. Jourdain is a wealthy citizen, the son of a draper. He is mad to be a *gentilhomme*, a noble. All kinds of parasites gather round him—a music master, a dancing master, a fencing master, a tailor, Dorante a pennyless aristocrat—and fool him to the top of his bent. His daughter Lucile is in love with an honest fellow Cléonte, but M. Jourdain will not hear of the marriage because Cléonte refuses to say he is of noble blood. Whereupon Covielle, Cléonte's valet, intervenes. He appears as an emissary from the son of the Grand Turk, asking for Lucile's hand on behalf of that youthful potentate. M. Jourdain is overjoyed. The prospect of such an alliance flatters his dearest wishes; and when the son of the Grand Turk himself appears, speaking an unintelligible jargon—of course he is Cléonte in disguise—and bestows on the absurd father a fantastic title and the insignia of a ridiculous order, the marriage is as good as concluded. A notary is sent for to draw up the contract. Turkish dances, or what may have stood for such in 1670, fitly conclude the proceedings. Madame Jourdain, and Nicole the maid, furnish an admirable foil of common sense to M. Jourdain's folly.

The last of the Court pieces with which Molière had any connection, is "Psyché," first performed at the Tuileries on the 17th January, 1671. Of

this play, which is again freely interlarded with dances, revels and transformation scenes, the general plan is Molière's, but, for want of time, he only actually wrote the Prologue, the first act, and the first scenes of the second and third acts respectively, the remainder having been written by Corneille, and the songs by Quinault. The story is mainly borrowed from Apuleius, with such changes as are necessary for scenic purposes; and it is very interesting to note, in the collaboration of Corneille and Molière, how each works according to his own genius, Molière presenting the old fable with something of the ironic familiarity which he had used in "Amphitryon," while Corneille treats it with grace and lyric charm. As to plot, Venus is jealous of Psyché's beauty, and Psyché's two sisters are jealous too, and l'Amour and Psyché love one another with a love more than human;—and the two evil sisters sow doubt in Psyché's heart, and get her to ask her lover-god to tell his name and condition, and he does so with disastrous results; and finally Jupiter reconciles Venus with l'Amour and Psyché, and all are made happy. The play is written, like "l'Amphitryon," in *vers libres*, not the usual dramatic alexandrines, and is worthy, both verse and story, of the two men of genius by whom it was wrought.

In "les Fourberies de Scapin," written for the town, not the Court, and borrowed in part from Terence, Molière went back to forms of comedy which had already pleased in "l'Etourdi." Again we have a valet, Scapin, who, like

Ulysses, is "for wiles renowned," a scoundrel of infinite resource. But the play is so well known, so still popular, that I need scarcely tell once more how he tricks and befools the two fathers, Argante and Géronte, by what specious lies he extorts their money, how he beats one of them in a sack, and how, finally, he obtains forgiveness for his misfeasances by pretending to be at the point of death. There is a set plot, of course, —two pairs of lovers with whom things do not go smoothly—a long-lost daughter restored to her right parentage,—and final reconciliation and happiness. And throughout the scenes, the dialogue, what a dash, a brio, a verve, a frank fresh breeze of laughter! The fun is Homeric. Go, reader, and see M. Coquelin play the part of Scapin next time you have the opportunity!

In "les Précieuses ridicules," which he had brought from the provinces, Molière had ridiculed, ostensibly at least, the provincial bluestockings. In "les Femmes savantes," first produced in Paris on the 11th March, 1672, he satirized their metropolitan sisters, the *Précieuses* who had taken their tone from the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and continued, in the later salons, to misjudge of literature, think affectedly, and talk in literary jargon. The first piece is, as it were, a kind of first sketch of the second; but a sketch by no means crude or unfinished; while the fuller picture is largely varied in composition and colour, and a masterpiece. Chrysale is a *bon bourgeois*, well-meaning, weak, quite reasonable if left alone, but altogether under the thumb

of his wife Philaminte. There are two children of the marriage, Armande and Henriette, of whom the first follows her mother in being a *précieuse*, a pedantic lover of highflown language and sentiment, while Henriette contents herself with being a sensible and charming young woman. Clitandre, an excellent fellow, and of the Court, has first made love to Armande; but, rejected by that Platonic lady, has now, greatly to her jealous disgust, won the affection of Henriette. Chrysale, the father, approves of Clitandre's suit. Philaminte, the mother, has, however, other views for her younger daughter. Philaminte is besotted of Trissotin, a past-master in the euphuistic jargon of the coterie, a wretched rhymester whom it is their fashion to regard as a distinguished poet, and she intends that *he* should be Henriette's husband. Trissotin himself is much more than agreeable; he has a keen view to the family money-bags. So matters proceed to such extremity that a notary is called in to execute the marriage contract, Clitandre and Trissotin being both present, and their relative claims still in debate between wife and husband. Just as the latter begins to yield, Ariste, Chrysale's brother, rushes in to announce that Philaminte and Chrysale are ruined. The mercenary Trissotin immediately draws back. Clitandre, though a poor man, is overjoyed. But Henriette refuses to add to the burden of his poverty. Thereupon Ariste explains that his announcment was merely a ruse, that the family gold has not taken to itself wings, and Clitandre and Henriette at least are made

happy. Philaminte is not so far a fool that she does not now see through Trissotin. As to Armande, she is, somewhat enigmatically, left to the consolations of philosophy.

Such is roughly the outline of the play, and it will be seen that the plot is good and in no way forced. But what is outline apart from colour, light and shade, life? Here, to drop metaphor, the characters are one and all excellent, Henriette, especially, may be taken as the type of the reasonable and capable young Frenchwoman, intelligent without pedantry; she acts as an admirable foil to her artificial mother, sister, and absurd aunt. There is fine comedy, too, in the scenes in which Chrysale shows his domestic poltroonery, and the scenes in which Trissotin reads his affected verses, and quarrels with Vadius the pedant. How far did Molière himself endorse the views of Ariste and Clitandre as to the essential domesticity of the feminine intellect? The question has been much debated. I doubt if, in terms, he would have accepted Iago's "suckling fools, and chronicling small beer," as being the full limit of woman's functions. Something of charm he would, no doubt, have added. But for woman's rights, intellectual or political, and in our modern sense, he was certainly not ripe. The fact is that here, as in "Tartuffe," it was difficult to attack the semblance without touching the reality; and we may agree with M. Brunctière, the distinguished French critic, that the decencies of language inculcated by the Hôtel de Rambouillet, the refinements of thought and

speech where women were concerned—that these rather wanted fostering than discouragement.

In "les Précieuses" and "les Femmes savantes," Molière had ridiculed the blue stockings; in "Tartuffe" he had lashed hypocrisy; in "l'Avare" avarice; in "George Dandin" and "le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" he had made merry over the sorrows of those who would climb the social ladder; in "les Fâcheux" and other pieces he had twitted the courtiers with their absurdities; in the "Amants Magnifiques" he had shown his healthy disdain for that craving after occult knowledge which seems to be one of man's ineradicable foibles. But to no object of satire did he return so constantly as the medical profession. He casts a stone at it in "Don Juan." He assails it with envenomed shafts in "M. de Pourceaugnac," in "l'Amour Médecin," in "le Médecin malgré lui." And now, in his last work of all, "le Malade imaginaire," the dying man not only jibes at the practitioners of the time, their pretensions, their ignorance, their absurdity and futility—and indeed medicine, apart from surgery, was then at the lowest of ebbs—but also denies medical science in its very essence. Whence this *saeva indignatio* this inextinguishable rancour? Was it, as has been surmised, that sick and suffering, he turned savagely upon those who pompously proferred health or alleviation, promising what they failed to afford? Who shall tell? Of Molière's inner life we know very little. Of letters or other forms of self-revelation, we possess absolutely none.

The play was originally intended for performance at Court, and is accompanied by music, dances, ballet scenes; but Molière was, for the nonce, in disfavour, ousted from the royal graces by Lully, and the King would apparently have none of it. The first performance took place on the 10th of February, 1673. Argan, personified by Molière himself, is a hypochondriac, a man in good health, who fancies himself an invalid. Being perfectly selfish, he wishes to marry his daughter, Angélique, to Thomas Diafoirus, son of Diafoirus and heir of Purgon—both also of the Faculty—and he wishes to do this because he will thus be always secure of attendance in his various ailments. But Thomas is absurd; and Angélique is already in love with Cléante, who has defended her in some brawl. Cléante introducing himself into the house as a music master, is seen through by the too wily father, and affairs look rather bad for the lovers. Then Toinette, the maid, saves the situation. She appears as a new practitioner with superior methods, and shakes Argan's faith. Purgon, who is an arch blockhead, retires in dudgeon. Toinette, reappearing in her own person, induces Argan to sham death in order to try the affection of Béline, his wife and Angélique's stepmother, who is trying to get Angélique relegated to a convent. Béline's rejoicings over the imagined demise of her husband open his eyes. Cléante reappears and promises to become a doctor if that will enable him to obtain the hand of his love. The piece ends pretty well anyhow. The concluding *intermède*, or musical

ballet, is in dog-Latin, and figures the mock ceremonies with which the medical aspirant is supposed to be admitted to the full honours of the profession. To Béralde, Argan's brother, are assigned the denunciations of medicine and its votaries.

This finishes the tale of Molière's dramatic works. His non-dramatic works are few in number, and may shortly be dismissed. There is a "Remerciment au Roi," a letter of thanks to the King for the pension awarded to the poet in 1663. This is at once alert and manly, being free from the fulsome adulation then common. There is also a longer poem of 366 lines, entitled "la Gloire du Dôme du Val-de-Grâce, written in praise of the frescoes executed by Molière's friend Mignard in the church of the Val-de-Grâce. This may be described as a piece of excellent art criticism, according to the standards of the time, written in fine rhetorical verse. It is by no means the empty panegyric of a poet who knows nothing about art.

HIS ART

A WRITER of Molière's greatness—a greatness acknowledged for some two centuries and a half—scarcely requires "letters of commendation." It would be idle, almost ridiculous, at this late time of day, to justify, or enforce, any remarks on his genius, by a selection of passages in his honour, culled here and there from the literature of Europe. But yet I cannot forbear to quote one passage at least from the many which Goethe has devoted to his praise; and I do so, partly because Goethe's loving appreciation is not that of a Frenchman, but much more, because, upon the topmost summits of Olympus, where dwell the supreme literary gods of all time, Goethe sits as Molière's peer. Speaking then to Eckermann, in one of those colloquies in which the old poet and sage gave expression to his matured opinion, he says, "I have known and loved Molière from my youth up, and have learnt from him during my whole life. Every year I never fail to read some of his plays, so as always to keep in touch with perfection. It is not only the consummate artist that delights me, it is especially the lovable nature, the high culture of the poet." And again: "He is a man by himself."

This is high praise from the highest. Let us try to examine the quality of Molière's greatness more closely, and see in what it consists. And, for this purpose, it may be as well to proceed by elimination, and find out what he was *not*. In the first place then, he had most certainly never been "caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words," like Dante or Milton, or, with them, walked over the "burning marl," and been bitten by the fiery spume flakes of the infernal pit. "Of heaven or hell I have no power to sing," he would have said with William Morris, and said it with a smile. Nor, though in youth he had translated Lucretius' poem, did he ever, like Aeschylus, deal with the great elemental forces; and to the problems of man's destiny, the great questions of the "whence and whither," he seems, so far as his works show, to have been indifferent. Tragedy he doubtless knew, and, in a measure, felt. He was too apt a student of life not to appreciate "the pity of it," all the overwhelming odds against our human happiness, the futility, in so many cases, of the struggle against circumstance, the cruelty of antecedent, the fateful nature of character. The snares that men lay for themselves and those they love, he knew without question. And this tragic note, "muted" as one may say, and dominated by laughter, can be heard, if you choose to listen for it, in some of his plays, in "George Dandin," in "l'Avare," in "le Misanthrope," in "le Malade imaginaire." "Je ris de tout pour ne pas en pleurer," says Beaumarchais, "I laugh at everything, because

if I did not laugh, I should be moved to weep." That there is a sort of antithesis of tears in much of Molière's mirth, I admit. But to call him a tragedian in the sense that Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, were tragedians, would at least be excessive. Here still we must eliminate.

Again, he was not, like Homer and Virgil, the creator of a large imaginative world, where men and women of heroic mould move freely, and with an ampler gesture and speech; or, like Spenser, the creator of a world of beautiful fancy. The men and women that walk *his* stage are of the earth, earthy. They are such, with due modernization of dress, and of certain relatively unimportant forms of conduct and language, as you and I may meet any day of our lives; and the scenes in which they figure are quite ordinary. They walk through no enchanted region like the Red Cross Knight, or Britomart. If they come across Deceit and Wickedness, as they not unfrequently do, it is not in the shape of Duessa, or Lucifera's team of the Deadly Sins, driven by Satan. In brief neither the epic nor romantic spirit is, in any sense, that of Molière.

Had he, then, any love of Nature? Is there any sign that his eye had dwelt, lovingly and lingeringly as that of the Divine Master, upon such sights as the unfolding of the wheat—"first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear"? To Shakespeare, born and bred in Stratford, amid central England's beauties of field, and hedge-row, and wood and river, it seems to

have come naturally to love the daffodil, the violet, the oxlip; to mark that the willow turns the hoar side of its leaf to the stream; to note when the swallow "dares," and follow the lark as it soars singing at heaven's gate. To Molière, by birth and nurture a Parisian, these things made no appeal. During twelve years he had perambulated France, south and east and west, and so far as scenery goes, and inanimate objects, and every animate object that was not man, he might just as well have spent the time walking up and down the streets of the metropolis. One can almost count on one's fingers the passages in which he uses nature for purpose of simile or metaphor; and where he does he gives no evidence of keenness of observation or of love. Yet France is *la belle France*. What Shakespeare saw in England must have passed, in actual fact, before the bodily eyes of Molière. The difference was in the soul of the spectator. I doubt if, to the Parisian of the seventeenth century, "the primrose by the river's brim" was even a primrose.

As to the creatures of pure fancy that Shakespeare loved—that delicate fringe of beings outside our grosser humanity—Oberon and Titania and their Court, Ariel the dainty spirit, all those gossamer creatures—why, what regard would the man all heedless of the primrose have for them? No "Plea of the Midsummer Fairies," even couched in Hood's lovely verse, would have found grace with that robust understanding.

Having tried thus to indicate what Molière

was not, let me try, however imperfectly, to show what he was. Going back to his biography, we find him to have been a Parisian, born in the earlier part of the seventeenth century, the son and grandson of middle class people, essentially the child of the French bourgeoisie, essentially the product of the French nature at what may be called its centre. And of that nature I take the dominant characteristic to be strong common-sense. It is a nature that accepts certain human principles without controversy; that loves the golden mean; that entertains a strong dislike for enthusiasms; that abhors fads; that possesses a full appreciation of the practicabilities of life; that is sceptical within limits; that loves its joke, and, by a time-honoured prescription, finds its readiest jest in the troubles of married men; and at the time when Molière's mind was in process of education, the time of the Regency and of the Fronde, of Gassendi and Saint-Evremond, there was a spirit of pleasure blowing over the land, and of free thought.

Thus, to particularize, in the long vexed question of the relative positions of man and woman, Molière took what may be called the old normal view. Man was to do the world's work, to extend knowledge, to acquire learning. Woman was to be his helpmeet, to look after the household, to perpetuate the race. "I take it God made the woman for the man, and for the good and increase of the world," says the "curate Edward Bull," in Tennyson's poem, and Molière would, no doubt, have endorsed that view. And he

would have held, too, that whatever her education, she would go "after kind" like Agnèse in the "Ecole des Femmes." That was her natural bent. As to her intellect, she might, with profit, cultivate it, provided that she did so no further than was desirable for social pleasure. If she went beyond that point, there was a probability of affectation and pedantry; and for woman's artificialities, Molière had very keen shafts. Nay, in his robust directness, he seems sometimes half impatient of her refinements. Even so ardent an admirer of the seventeenth century, and all that pertains to it, as M. Brunetière, seems to hold that in the "Femmes savantes" he went beyond the mark, and untowardly nipped a certain desirable graciousness of purity in the social intercourse between the sexes.

Again, there is no note in Molière of the political or social reformer. He accepted fully the conditions of life in which it had pleased God to place France at that time. Efforts have, now and again, been made to show that he was a revolutionist, born out of due season, a sort of republican of 1793, eating out his heart with suppressed rage at the Court of Lous XIV, almost ready, as one might say, to croak with Marat for the heads of the King and the Aristocrats. This is pure imagination. In "le Misanthrope," as we shall see, he rails at certain foibles, but those foibles are the foibles of humanity, not of any particular date, or polity. The "Misanthrope" would have said his say with as much "actuality" in 1793 as in 1666, as, indeed, in

this our present year of grace. No, Molière had no quarrel with the world in which he lived. I take it that in so far as he troubled himself with politics, which would not be very much, he thought the country was in strong hands, and very well out of the anarchy that had prevailed during his youth. I take it also that his admiration for Louis was quite genuine; that he liked the Court, though he laughed at it; and that his own successes, with their results—a good house, artistic surroundings, the society of the wise and witty, all the concomitants of wealth—were entirely pleasing to him. The burgess in his heart was satisfied.

And he was a man of no religious, or indeed of any other, enthusiasms. This world was, if not a very perfect world—and Molière would have been the last man to say with Dr. Pangloss that it was the best possible, and all for the best in it—yet at least it was a very interesting world, and an excellent sphere for a man of power and activity. And then the other world was very remote, and so imperfectly known! Let us eat and drink, and develop the forces that are in us, and fight our battles, and be kind to our neighbours, and drink life to the lees. Who knows whether there will be another draught for us? Outwardly we will be respectful to religion, and in terms only attack its counterfeit, because religion is a social force, with which it is wise to count. Inwardly we will think as we please. And meanwhile, till the end comes, let us cultivate a perfect sanity of spirit. Let us keep clear of

cant. Let us see through all quackery, knavery, and folly. Let us see men and women as they are.

Does all this seem not much? Does it seem a belittling of Molière to bring down his great figure to the proportions of a typical French *bourgeois* of the seventeenth century? I think not. Rather does his genius elevate the type to noble and heroic proportions.

From that standpoint of his, a central standpoint of strong common sense, never did man survey his fellows with clearer or more penetrative vision. If he had no eye for landscape in fullness or detail, be sure that he keenly marked every man, woman or child, with whom he was brought into contact. When at Pézenas, he would sit by the hour, silent, in the barber's shop, noting the humours of the customers. Afterwards, in Paris, it was observed that except in comparatively rare moments of congenial social intercourse, he would remain quiescent, speechless for long hours, watching, recording. A "painter," his enemy Chalussay called him;—it seems to have been a sort of nickname—the idea being, I suppose, that he was for ever taking thumb-nail sketches of his contemporaries. The term was meant for a taunt—it turns to his praise. Yes, he was a painter; but one of that great fraternity of artists whose vision pierces beyond the outward mask, the seeming show, and reaches the soul behind. And what a gallery he has left us! Those thumb-nail sketches bore fruit. There are the miser, with his ghastly wor-

ship, "which is idolatry"; the libertine noble, fearing neither God nor devil; the hypocrite making a show of religion for vile ends; the venal poetaster; the women, the aesthetes of their day, who worship at his ridiculous shrine; the hypochrondiac who poisons his own life and that of those about him; the stern moralist outraged by the shams of society; the men and women striving to force themselves into a social position higher than their own; the doctors with their insufferable jargon; the deceived husband and his evil wife. There they all are, the Marquises and fine ladies of the Court; the men and women of the middle class, of whom some are foolish and absurd, while others are sound of sense and worthy of deportment; and there are the valets and soubrettes who serve them, with ingenuity and resource, and tongues that are all too ready. Notable in this gallery are the women. There is no *manque de femmes*, no neglect of womankind, in Molière's art. See Agnès, in whom nature blossoms so freely against all nipping influences of environment; see those proud beauties, Lucile (of the "Dépit amoureux"), and Elvire (of "Don Garcie"); see that splendid young woman of the world, Célimène; see those figures of reason and good sense, and all womanly withal, of which Henriette (in "les Femmes savantes") is only one of the most distinguished. All these are but a few among Molière's men and women. A full catalogue is out of the question—they are too many and too varied. There they are, each with a strongly marked personality; each a living

man or woman. And he had the gift, the rare gift, not only of creating individuals who are really individual, but also typical.

The typical,—let me stay for a moment to elucidate. If we examine French classical literature, and contrast it with English literature, which is mainly romantic, we shall find, I think that the French classicist endeavours to reach and reproduce, what is essential, apart from adjuncts picturesque or other, and, in dealing with man, to depict the passions and feelings which are general, rather than to individualize and depict the passions and feelings—the idiosyncracies in short—of any man or woman who may be altogether exceptional. Thus he tries always to simplify and concentrate, hoarding, as it were, his light to throw it in full on what he deems of greatest import. And thus, too, the I, the individualized I, which occupies a place so enormous in romantic literature, recedes almost out of view in the great Classics. With them man is the protagonist, not the poet himself with his private sorrows and wrongs. And further again, the classicist, in his form, cultivates the great qualities of moderation, lucidity, and restrained perfection. He never "lets himself go." Pegasus, as our fathers would have said, is always in hand.

The French poet who best exemplifies the classic ideal in the drama, is Racine, the very perfection of whose art tends to hide, at least from the foreign reader accustomed to art of a totally different kind, the strength of the passions that flow beneath his smooth and beautiful verse.

But Molière exemplifies it too, though, as I shall try presently to show, he, as a comic writer, was led to modify the ideal in some degree. For Molière habitually disregards adjuncts, and concentrates himself on essentials. In his greater plays of character he suffers nothing to distract the spectator's attention from the leading motive. Harpagon is a miser only, not a miser subject, like Shylock, to racial hate, and wearing a gabardine all spit-bespattered. Tartuffe's hypocrisy is ever in view. So is the Misanthrope's misanthropy. Don Garcie is jealousy incarnate. M. Jourdain is a quintessential blockhead trying to ape the manners of his betters. Don Juan is a Spaniard, if you like, but only in so far as a Spanish noble, like any other noble, may be a man enfranchised from all moral restraints; he is the scoundrel aristocrat of all times and nationalities. George Dandin is the weak husband, powerless to battle with the social conditions into which he has thrust himself. Trissotin, the poetaster, Vadius, the pedant, and the learned ladies, Philaminte and Armande, are as old as the hills, if one may say so without being ungallant to the two ladies. Is Argan, the "Malade imaginaire," the invalid who has no complaint, is he unknown in this England of ours? Ask any specialist in nerve disorders—nay, look round through the circle of your acquaintance.

Thus Molière realizes the classical ideal: he creates what is typical and true for all time. But he possesses likewise, if one may say so, the gift of individualizing the type, of giving it per-

sonality, character, passions, the pulsation of hot blood—life, in short. Ah, that gift of life, what a gift it is! There are some men—Henry IV of France, Napoleon, Fritz of Germany, Cromwell, Gordon—who lived so intensely while they moved among men, that death seems to have lost its power, and we feel about them as if they were living still. And so with the creations of this great master: they, too, are alive. To me Molière forms, as it were, a sort of bridge between the classic and romantic ideals. He unites them at their highest point.

And the healthy laughter of the man! It flashes, sometimes lambent, sometimes forked and scathing, through nearly all his work. In "l'Etourdi," "le Dépit amoureux," "les Fâcheux," "Amphitryon," "les Fourberies de Scapin," "M. de Pourceaugnac," and others, it is playful, breaking out irresistibly from the situation, the apposition of incongruous characters, the superb play of the dialogue. Mascarille and Scapin perform their tricks. Too credulous fathers are befooled. Cowards exhibit their poltroonery. M. de Pourceaugnac suffers himself to be dragged through the most rediculous of adventures. The Comtesse d'Escarbagnas shows herself for the absurd old countess that she is. Jupiter and the gods mingle with men in a piquant familiarity. So mirth reigns unrestrained. Anon it ceases, as it were, to be irresponsible. The laughter becomes fraught with meaning and purpose, carrying dismay into the ranks of quackery and pretence, ringing vengeful about the ears of Molière's enemies

(as in "la Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes," "l'Impromptu de Versailles," and "les Femmes Savantes"); full of bitterness and scornful in presence of hypocrisy. Never did greater master play through the whole gamut of the risible.

Was his mirth always in season? It is difficult to be invariably merry and wise. I have already hinted a doubt whether in "Tartuffe" and the "Femmes savantes" Molière did not suffer his satire to go beyond its legitimate mark; and the fun that takes its point from the sorrows of the deceived husband appeals rather to the *esprit gaulois* than to the English sense of humour. So, too, in "le Malade imaginaire" there are certain sick-room episodes and details of which the fun to our insular taste is not apparent. But mainly Molière's ridicule is well placed; and it would be a great mistake to regard him as a coarse writer. Indeed, if due regard be had to the time in which he lived, he was very much the reverse. And in any case we English should be the last to throw this particular stone at him, considering how our own dramatists—Dryden, Wycherley, Shadwell—coarsened and vulgarized his work when adapting it to the English stage.

That Molière's plots often leave something to be desired is doubtless true. Though the opening of "Tartuffe" is masterly the conclusion is lame; so is that of "L'Avare." Once and again it cannot be said that there is any conclusion at all. In too many cases the knot of the story is untied by some stage device—the supposititious child, the long-lost son or daughter, or some one's

shipwreck, and disappearance and reappearance. For any failures in this respect, in so far as they may exist, a plausible explanation and excuse has been given. It has been argued that comedy, pure comedy, especially the comedy of character, does not comport with plot and climax, as tragedy naturally does. For tragedy deals with passions at war with one another, and with fate and circumstance, and from that warfare ensues the natural climax of death. But comedy deals with what is ridiculous in man, his absurdities and foibles, and these, within the sphere of comedy itself, can only lead to their own development and fuller display. If they lead, as they doubtless often do, to the suffering of others besides the protagonist, or even of the protagonist himself, we pass beyond the confines of comedy—confines which Molière himself respected with such rigour. This is ingenious. Is it altogether conclusive? I offer the solution for what it may be worth. Of one thing we may be sure, that Molière—author, manager, actor, past-master in matters theatrical—knew perfectly what he was about when he constructed his plays.

His style has not passed unchallenged. Fénelon, writing almost as a contemporary, uses with regard to it the hard word *galimatias—i.e.*, nonsense, rodomontade. La Bruyère speaks of "jargon," and says he did not "write purely." Voltaire's criticism is often severe. Théophile Gautier, to come to later times—while hesitating to put the opinion into print, because "masterpieces ought to be sacred"—was in the habit

of saying to his familiars that Molière wrote "like a pig"; and Scherer, a serious critic whom it was impossible to ignore, greatly fluttered the public some five and twenty years ago in an article[1] intended to show that Molière versified hastily, carelessly, as a playwright eager for the production of his next piece, and not as a poet solicitous of perfection. This was very terrible. The "Moliérists" of the time possessed an organ, "Le Moliériste," in which they, metaphorically, held up pious hands in horror. One of them, whom I take to have been the late Gustave Larroumet rejoined fiercely that Molière's language was "the most original ever written in France, the most expressive, the richest," far finer than that of Racine, and asked in anger how it came to pass that every voice hostile to the great French writer—the voices of Rousseau, Schlegel, Scherer—had an accent of Geneva. Sarcey, the first dramatic critic of the day, replied in a different tone.[2] He explained that Molière wrote primarily in view of the stage, and that it is primarily from the stage point of view that his writings should be judged. Thus the repetitions, the reduplications of thought which Scherer imputed to the poet as his main fault, were in the dramatist excellences, enabling the actor to drive home every important point and make it clear to the audience. And Sarcey quoted,

[1] Republished in vol. viii of his "Etudes sur la Littérature contemporaine," "Une hérésie littéraire."

[2] "Quarante ans de Théâtre, Molière et la Comédie classique."

à propos of this, the words of a great master of elocution at the Conservatoire, who had said to him: "Molière is the only dramatist—the only one, I tell you—whom it is always easy to speak, so much do his prose and verse lend themselves to the tone and manner of conversation."

This is just. The dramatist, like the orator indeed, has an audience in view; his words are not pure *book*, and Molière, without question, regarded himself as a dramatist rather than a book-writer. This, if other proof were needed, is shown by the Preface to the "Précieuses ridicules," where he explains how he hesitated to give to the world his plays without the accompanying "ornaments" of "action" and "voice." It is shown also by the rare publication of the plays during his lifetime, and the absence of any collected edition till after his death. But granting all this—granting that when we read the plays a certain allowance must occasionally be made for stage effect, granting that there are occasional passages—passages in the prose and verse, but in the verse especially—where Homer has nodded, nodded through weariness, or been over hasty, and where the meaning is obscure and the style involved—granting all this, what a splendid writer he is! That he wrought in view of the cultured is unquestionable, in view of the Court and the men of letters, but primarily he wrote for mankind. There is the old story, a story probably authentic, that the first critic to whom his plays were submitted was his cook, and that when she laughed he knew it was *hit* and not *miss*. So his

language, however ennobled by his genius or refined by courtly influence, remained steeped, as it were, in the national genius, the popular spirit. The soul of France vitalizes it; as his characters live so his language lives. In the prose this can scarcely be contested. Taking the great mass of it, there is such strength, power, lithe force, such an arrowy directness and firmness of grasp, the dialogue is so unforced and yet so forcible, that praise becomes an impertinence. We can but bow in presence of a master.

In the verse let us distinguish. There are certain critics for whom poetry in order to be poetry must possess a certain verbal magic, a suggestion of colour and music, a halo of meaning outside the thought itself, an efflorescence of imagination and fancy—such qualities as may be found in Keats and Shakespeare for instance, and numberless other English poets; and more sparsely in their French compeers, as, for instance, among many, Victor Hugo and Verlaine. Now it is clear that if these qualities are essential to poetry Molière was not a poet, for he did not possess them; and this doubtless was why Gautier bespattered him with angry words. Molière's view of poetry I take to have been prose lifted in tone, made rhythmic, and with the added point of rhyme. For the charm, the iridescences, to which I have referred, he cared, so far as appears, nothing. Accordingly his verse possesses the qualities of his prose, with something added, something different. It has the same force, the same life, the same admirable dramatic qualities,

and besides something almost statuesque in its austere rejection of ornament; and it has a music of its own. Yes, it is poetry, and of its own kind, excellent.

Louis XIV once asked Boileau in effect[1] what writer he, Boileau, considered had shed most lustre on his reign. "Molière," answered Boileau. "I should not have thought so," replied the King, who, doubtless, was in the habit of regarding Molière more as a playwright and organizer of entertainments than an author. "But," he added, with unwonted humility, "doubtless you know best." Did Boileau know best? There were giants in those days, men of renown: Pascal, Corneille, Racine, Bossuet, Madame de Sévigné, la Fontaine. Did Molière over-top these? We may, I think, hold that Boileau was right, and saw here with the eyes of posterity.

[1] *Le plus rare*, was the expression used.

"LE MISANTHROPE"

IF we are to believe Grimarest, Molière's early biographer and almost contemporary, Molière said in regard to the "Misanthrope," "I have never done anything better, and certainly I can do nothing better;" and that judgement posterity has ratified, not indeed with absolute unanimity, for when were all critics agreed? yet with a concensus of opinion that may rightly be called general. In this play, which almost transcends comedy, Molière attained to the highest summit of his art—the highest and the most austere. Here there is no element of farce, nothing in dialogue or situation to provoke light mirth. If we laugh, it is seriously, almost sadly.

The piece was produced, as we have seen, on the 4th June, 1666, between two lighter comedies, "l'Amour Médecin" and "le Médecin malgré lui," and it was first played, not before the Court, but at the *Palais-Royal* theatre. The story can be soon told. Alceste, whose misanthropy develops as the play proceeds—he is the *Misanthrope* — is a man of sensitive and morbid rectitude, abhorring not only all forms of dishonesty, but even the venial forms of social insincerity that merge into politeness, and become almost inevitable if civilized men are

to live together without friction. He has on hand a lawsuit, and should, according to the evil custom then universally prevalent, visit the judges in order to enlist their sympathies. He is in love with Célimène, a young widow, a very young widow, aged no more than twenty, scarcely more than a girl in years, but brilliant of wit, possessing an assured social charm, already a leader of society, intoxicated with her youth, her beauty, her position, her conquests—in fine, a finished coquette. "Why," asks his friend, Philinte, a courtier and a gentleman, who, while affecting no such isolated heights as Alceste, represents something above the average of moral uprightness, "why do you indispose your judges by neglecting to take the usual steps to enlist their favour? Those steps are so customary that their omission becomes a slight." "Because," replies Alceste, anticipating the reply of later generations, "because, if my cause is just, as I know it to be, personal influence should be out of place." "How is it," pursues Philinte, passing to a more delicate subject, "how is it that you have given your heart to Célimène? There is her cousin Eliante, she is sincerity itself, has every virtue that you yourself admire, and would, I am mournfully convinced, for I am myself attached to her, look favourably on your suit. But as to Célimène, she exemplifies in her own person all those faults of the age on which you have been descanting with so much eloquence." "I know it," says Alceste, sadly, and in his voice I think we may hear the cry of Molière's own heart—"I

know it, but then I love her." Whereupon there enters a certain courtier, Oronte, who, after loud professions of esteem and regard, which Alceste receives very coldly, proceeds to inflict upon that misanthropist a sonnet. Alceste had not the slightest desire to hear the sonnet, still less to pronounce judgement on its merits, but being compelled thereto, declares the lines to be bad, worse, I venture to think, than they really are, and half quarrels with Philinte because he praises them. Naturally Oronte is incensed. A duel seems imminent. Fresh from this interview Alceste proceeds to lecture Célimène: why does she suffer herself to be surrounded by unworthy suitors? "Must I drive them away with a stick?" she pertinently inquires; "you should be satisfied with the knowledge that among them you have my preference." While they argue, two of the suitors in question, the Marquises Acaste and Clitandre—we are throughout in the best society—and also Philinte, and Eliante, come in, and the conversation becomes general. Célimène, however, holds the ball. Her satiric wit flashes lambent upon their friends of the Court, bringing out their ridicules, their foibles—not, be it remarked, their vices or malpractices. All applaud her satirical fireworks except Alceste, whom she rallies in turn over his mania for contradiction and fault-finding. At this point he is called away on account of the threatened duel with Oronte, and Arsinoé, a prudish lady no longer young, who has herself designs on Alceste, appears on the scene, and waspishly attacks Célimène. At

tongue-fence, however, Célimène need fear no rival. Arsinoé is no more successful in breaking through her guard, or warding off her counter attack, than she is, just afterwards, in making an impression on the heart of Alceste. She does not, however, accept defeat. She strikes a disloyal blow. She gives to Alceste a letter, presumably written in affectionate terms, and tells him it is a letter written by Célimène to Oronte. Alceste is incensed. In his indignation he offers marriage to Eliante, an offer which that prudent young woman refuses, notwithstanding an acknowledged inclination for her angry suitor; and he then proceeds to upbraid Célimène. Célimène acknowledges the letter at once, intimates that it is a perfectly harmless missive, having been addressed to a woman, and suggests that much jealousy has made him mad: a true lover should be satisfied when his mistress acknowledges her love. In a passionate transport he wishes that she were without birth, without means, an outcast, so that she might owe everything to his affection. Such a prospect does not appeal to Célimène at all.

Meanwhile Alceste's lawsuit is decided in favour of his rascally adversary, and in a transport of indignation against the wickedness of men, he determines to bury himself in the country, far from town and Court, and to test Célimène's love by asking her to share his exile. But, as it happens, Alceste is not the only man who has received encouragement from the *grande coquette*. Oronte appears on the scene, and both he and

Alceste summon her to make a definite choice. As she is fencing with them, in the presence of her cousin Eliante and of Philinte, Acaste and Clitandre and the vengeful Arsinoé come in—Acaste and Clitandre bearing each a letter addressed to himself by Célimène—a letter written in terms of affection for the recipient, but containing caricature portraits of Alceste, Oronte, Clitandre, Acaste, of all her lovers in short. Célimène for once is struck dumb. She has no defence. Acaste and Clitandre make off, declaring that they will everywhere publish her falseness. Oronte denounces her. Arsinoé thinks the moment opportune to make a renewed siege upon the heart of Alceste, and is brushed aside. Then Alceste addresses Célimène, and at his voice she confesses her fault, and admits that he is entitled to hate her. "And can I hate you, traitress," he asks, "can I thus triumph over all my tenderness for you?" Yes, he will forgive her and take her to his heart if she will give up society and accompany him to his country solitude. She recoils. The sacrifice is too great. "I to give up the world before I grow old! No, I can marry you, but at twenty I cannot face exile." So he casts her off, and half turns to Eliante; but Eliante's sober affection is now given to Philinte, and after a word of kindly wishes for the two, Alceste concludes:

Betrayed on all sides, crushed with perfidy,
I leave this black abyss where evil reigns,
To seek some spot of earth, lone and remote,
Where one is free to be an honest man.

So the piece ends; but what, one wonders, was the real end? Philinte and Eliante, we know, intend to combat their friend's decision. Did they succeed? Did they keep him from leaving Paris? I scarcely think it. I imagine he went to his *château* for a time, and found his country neighbours, and his dependents, no better than their town compeers—the neighbours just as censorius and insincere, and much duller, and the dependents as obsequious and base—and that so he came back disenchanted with bucolic life, and perhaps married Célimène, a Célimène somewhat sobered by years—she was but twenty! and that they quarrelled pretty constantly ever after. As to Philinte and Eliante, so reasonable a couple no doubt enjoyed the sober happiness which they deserved. Arsinoé would, to the end of her life, tender voluble thanks to heaven that she had escaped from the toils set for her by Alceste. But this is all in cloudland.

Numerous are the controversies to which "le Misanthrope" has given rise. In the first place, there has been considerable discussion as to the originals from which the various characters were drawn. That M. de Montausier—a well known figure of the time, ex-Huguenot, soldier of distinction, cultured gentleman, husband of a daughter of the house of Rambouillet, soon to be appointed governor of the King's eldest son —that he mainly stood for the portrait of Alceste seems pretty certain; and I think that Molière too—the Molière of sad gray days, when enemies were rampant and unscrupulous and his wife

absolutely impossible — likewise contributed somewhat of himself to that portrait. Also I make no doubt that his wife, when acting the part of Célimène, as we know she did to perfection, was acting a part which her own personality had suggested: *satirique spirituelle*, she is described in the "Impromptu de Versailles." But, after all, such inquiries are of questionable value. So long as a poet's creation lives, it matters little from what chaos it was evolved. One can sympathize with Goethe when he deprecated investigations as to the precise village in Rhineland where Hermann courted Dorothea.

Of more really literary interest than the inquiry into the originals of the *dramatis personae* of the "Misanthrope," is the question of the character of the Misanthrope himself. This has been variously judged. To one set of critics he is the righteous man, the representative of truth and justice against the shams and compromises of society—an altogether august figure. So Rousseau held, and solemnly arraigned Molière for attaching to him a certain element of absurdity, and making virtue seem ridiculous in his person. Another set of critics opine, and this I venture to think is the right view, that Molière, in his supreme moderation and good sense, intended us to regard Alceste as a man who carried very sterling qualities to a comic excess. We were to laugh at as well as with him. At the same time he was to be a sympathetic personage. We, the spectators or readers of the play, were to be won by his essential uprightness, just as the personages in

the drama are won, each in his degree: Philinte and Eliante, who are themselves true and good, Oronte until his sonnet is attacked, and even Célimène, who loves him as much as her cold, glittering nature will allow her to love any one. Yes, I repeat, he is sympathetic, but with a point of absurdity—a "crank," according to our modern cant word. "How shall the world be served?" Molière would have asked with Chaucer. We are of the world, and must take our place there and fall into its ways, avoiding the wrong as best we can, otherwise we cease to be effective units in the army of mankind. So though he loved and respected Alceste, I think his regard had a smile in it, and that he held Philinte to be the better practical philosopher.

To show a man like Alceste in love with a woman like Célimène, was a stroke of art. Such loves—the loves of the incongruous—are, as we know, all too frequent. There is in the study here made a fine penetration. Vainly does Philinte, vainly does Arsinoé, vainly does his own heart, warn Alceste of Célimène's faults, warn him that they are just the faults that make their tempers for ever incompatible. "Yea, I know it, hold ye your peace," he almost seems to say with the prophet. True he expresses some hope that he will captivate the volatile beauty, and influence, amend, ameliorate; but so speaking I think he felt that he was flattering himself in vain. What he most really knew was that he loved her, that love was lord of all. He is in the toils of love, like Merlin in the enchanted tree.

And she, at some far away central self, is conscious that he is of better worth than the men by whom she is surrounded, but loves above all her youth and her beauty, and her keen wit, and her social power. A situation true and poignant, and—which Molière would, I take it, have liked better, for he was above all a playwright—a situation essentially dramatic, and lending itself admirably to his admirable dramatic treatment.

And with what restrained power, what measure, what delicacy, what classic qualities, in short, he deals with his theme! Let me here again emphasize these points in his art, turning, for purposes of illustration and contrast, to the English drama.

Like Alceste, Timon of Athens is a misanthrope: "I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind," he says of himself. To this state of mind he has been brought mainly by his own folly. Rich in public services, rich in gold and goods, he has squandered his wealth, wantonly, foolishly, without heed of the morrow. When the morrow arrives, and with it ruin, and his debts come home to roost, he appeals to his friends, to those on whom he has lavished his benefits, and finding them oblivious, ungrateful, he turns upon mankind like a savage dog, becomes a beast and lives on roots, and rails in foulest terms on man and woman alike, insulting, raging, shameless. But while *he* thus tears off the very shreds and decencies of humanity, Alceste, also wronged and indignant, so far from becoming a brute, never ceases to be a gentleman. Here are two

forms of art in juxtaposition and contrast: on the one side, "romantic" violence; on the other classic restraint. I don't think myself that in the restraint there is less power.

An analogous lesson has been drawn by Macaulay and Taine from Wycherley's play, "The Plain Dealer," produced in London in 1677, four years after Molière's death; and, no doubt, if we compare Wycherley's hero, Manly, with Alceste, there is something like the difference between Alceste and Timon. For Manly is a rude sea-dog, coarse of speech, ready with his hands, a "plain dealer," if you like, but rather because he neither knows nor greatly cares whether his rough tongue carries offence, than from any high rectitude of purpose. And thus he altogether differs from Alceste, who, as I have just said, is a gentleman. Indeed the differences between the two characters are so essential, the plays in which they figure so unlike, in plot, personages, dialogue, incidents,—we are such worlds asunder in the "Plain Dealer" and the "Misanthrope,"—that it appears to me there is difficulty in accepting the received opinion[1] that Wycherley borrowed character or play from Molière. The comparison seems rather to fail through utter dissimilarity.

[1] "The groundwork of the 'Plain Dealer' is taken from the 'Misanthrope' of Molière." (Macaulay, "Comic Dramatists of the Restoration.") "The 'Plain Dealer'... is an English version, in its principal characteristics of the 'Misanthrope' of Molière, greatly improved," etc. (Leigh Hunt on Wycherley.) "Greatly improved!" Heaven bless Leigh Hunt's simple soul!

Except on one point, perhaps. There is a scene in the "Plain Dealer" which evidently owes at least its first suggestion to the scene in which Célimène hits off so maliciously the foibles of her friends. Olivia, the coarse, loose heroine of the English play, similarly describes *her* acquaintances to an audience consisting first of her cousin Eliza, and afterwards of her admirers, Novel and Lord Plausible. But what a difference in artistry and tone! Célimène's thumb-nail sketches are admirable. They seem with a line or two, like a drawing by Phil May or M. Forain, to bring the person before you. There is Cléonte the extravagant fop; and Damon, whose profusion of words say nothing at all; and Timante who makes a mystery of a common "how do you do?" and Géralde the grandiloquent social boaster; and Bélise, with her absence of all conversation; and Adraste, the man with a grievance; and Cléon, whose sole merit is that of his cook; and Damis, the superior person;—there they all are, alive as they were in the days of Louis XIV, alive as their fellows are to-day. Contrast these with Olivia's gallery: Lady Autumn, who "looks like an old coach new painted"; her daughter, "like an ill piece of daubing in a new frame"; the would-be wit, "hang him!" who is "only an adopter of struggling jests and fatherless lampoons, by the credit of which he eats at good tables, and so, like the barren beggar-woman, lives by borrowed children": Sir John Current, a "wretch," who "endeavours only with the women to pass for a man

of courage, and with the bullies for a wit"; Sir Richard Court-Title who "makes love to that fulsome coach-load of honour, my Lady Goodly," who is "as fat as a hostess"; Lady Frances "as ugly as a citizen's lawfully begotten daughter"; Lady Betty, "as sluttish and slatternly as an Irish woman bred in France"; some unnamed woman, "as censorious and detracting a jade as a superannuated sinner"; and so on. Now it would be idle to deny that in much of Wycherley's dialogue there is a certain coarse brilliancy, as also that he possessed powers as a caricaturist, but his work suffers only too cruelly when brought into comparison with the finished art of Molière.

Nay, in that strong light even the work of Sheridan, brilliant as it is, will not stand. Let the reader bring to mind the great scandal scene in the "School for Scandal," a scene evidently again inspired by the scandal scene in the "Misanthrope." Molière gives us characters. Wycherley gives us some characters caricatured, and some descriptions of physical peculiarities. Sheridan—I am not denying the effectiveness of the scene—scarcely goes beyond the physical peculiarities: Miss Vermilion's rouge, her sister's "caulked" wrinkles, Miss Simper's teeth, Mrs. Prim's deficiencies in that respect, Mrs. Pursy's unwieldy proportions, Miss Sallow's gawkiness, and "cousin Ogle's" "Irish front, Caledonian locks, Dutch nose, Austrian lips, complexion of a Spaniard, and teeth *à la Chinoise.*" It is smart, amusing, what you will. But is there not a declension? Was not the wit offered by Molière to

his audience more polished, more refined, of a larger type?

To what extent did that audience fully appreciate it? Not at first, as would seem. The play, though essentially a comedy, in that it regards life from the comic side, is serious. It shows only the least popular aspect of its author's art. There is no fun, no farce, no exuberant gaiety, nothing to excite Homeric laughter. All proceeds soberly, and with an undercurrent of deeper thought. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, if after the first two performances the number of spectators fell off, and no very brilliant money success was secured. But the courtiers, who were judges of fine work, liked the play. Good intellects were numbered. Boileau, the best accredited critic of the time, anticipated the general verdict of posterity, by declaring it to be Molière's masterpiece. Molière himself, as we have seen, said he could do no better. I don't think, on the whole, he was ill satisfied.

As to style, Voltaire says, "the piece . . . is of all Molière's pieces the most strongly written." Scherer, on the other hand, whom I have already had occasion to quote, says: "The 'Misanthrope' passes for the best written of Molière's pieces; the contrary is the fact." And Théophile Gautier, whom I have also had occasion to quote, calls it *filth*, not meaning thereby any imputation on its morals, for morals were not in his line, but that the style failed to please his taste. Let us here, and at once, take side with Voltaire and the immense majority of critics.

"Le Misanthrope" is admirably written—written in language which is clear, direct, forcible, brilliant, ringing with stage effect, and the versification of its own kind is admirable. But how prove this without quotation—and how quote French in an English book, or show in a translation the charms of what is written in another language? I can but refer to the various scenes in which Alceste and Célimène are at issue, or the scene in which Célimène and her admirers discuss their common acquaintance. Let these stand for argument and demonstration.

But one word more. The play may seem, at first sight, all but devoid of action; and yet it is excellently disposed for the purpose which Molière himself had in view, viz., the development of the characters. As to this, I think we may accept unquestioning the verdict of M. Faguet, the able dramatic critic of the "Journal des Débats."

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MOLIÈRE considered himself a playwright and theatrical manager rather than a pure author, and was careless about the publication of his works. The first complete edition is that published at Paris after his death, in 1682, and edited by Vinot and by La Grange, who had been a prominent member of the troupe, and the writer of the famous "Régistre."

For present purposes the most complete edition is that which forms part of the collection of the "Grands Ecrivains de la France." This includes the works, with elaborate introductions and notes; a biography by M. Mesnard; a bibliography; and a lexicon of Molière's language. My own indebtedness to this edition is great, and I am glad to acknowledge it fully.

For those who want a Molière in handier form, I cannot do better than recommend the "Œuvres Complètes," published in one volume by the Oxford University Press.

Molière has been repeatedly translated into English from his own day to this, and English versions of the plays can be obtained in several forms.

Mr. Van Laun contributed to the "Moliériste," a monthly periodical published from 1879 to 1889, a series of papers in French on the plays in which English playwrights had adapted Molière's work to the English stage. I know of no essay or

volume on the same subject in English. A little volume in Henry Morley's "Universal Library" is entitled and contains "Plays from Molière by English Dramatists."

The first Life of Molière, was that which accompanied the edition of the works published in 1682. It was followed, in 1705, by another short life from the pen of Grimarest, who had not himself known Molière, but was a friend of Baron, Molière's pupil and younger companion. These two lives have a certain sketchy value—no more. But from the date when Molière established his company in Paris, contemporary references to him are frequent. These have been collected with pious zeal, and every kind of archive has been ransacked for any paper that might shed a light, however tiny, on his doings. We possess also, in the "Régistre" of La Grange, the treasurer of the company, a careful detailed record of performances, money receipts, salient facts, etc., etc., relating to the troupe, from the year 1659 onwards.

So we know a great deal *about* Molière. But the inner Molière it is difficult to get at. His published works are impersonal. Not one single letter of his has survived. Of his sixty or seventy known autographs the great majority are only signatures. Thus when we want to get at the essential significance of facts that are facts indeed, but only partially known facts, we are left only too much to surmise.

M. Mesnard's biography in the "Grands Ecrivains" is elaborate and very valuable. It is

scarcely a book for the general reader. M. Louis Moland's "Molière, sa vie et ses ouvrages" is more popular. But for a genial interesting account of the great dramatist and his surroundings, I cannot do better than recommend the late Gustave Larroumet's "La Comédie de Molière, l'auteur et le milieu."

In English there is a short Life by Mrs. Oliphant and F. Tarver, and a much fuller "Life of Molière," by Henry M. Trollope, just issued; and vol. iv of "A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times," by Karl Mantzius (translated), which has also just been issued, is entirely devoted to "Molière and his Times." These books were unknown to me when I wrote the preceding sections of this little book. The "Molière" of Mrs. Oliphant and Mr. Tarver was written twenty-seven years ago. Mr. Trollope's "Life" is, on the other hand, quite "up to date," and, if he will let me say so, a solid and careful piece of work. Herr Mantzius's volume is a very interesting account of the comic stage in France during the seventeenth century, with Molière for protagonist. I may also mention, as a skilfully executed *multum in parvo*, Mr. Andrew Lang's paper on Molière in the "Encyclopædia Britannica."

As to criticism, if I once attempted a list even of the important writers who have dealt with Molière's art, this microscopic bibliographical note would extend *ad infinitum*.

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